

RYOYU YUUKI
ART CHISATO NARUSE

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EATING
MAGICAL power
MADE me the
STRONGEST!

MAGIC STONE *Gourmet*



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Prologue

The blustery winter winds had blown through Ishtarica just as quickly as they had arrived. In place of the freshly melted snow, colorful flowers started to bloom—a sign that spring was fast approaching. Ein was now accustomed to his new life as the crown prince, his past year filled with precious memories. Krone's arrival and his bold address to a party of aristocrats were only a few of the highlights from the boy's momentous year.

"What did you want to talk about?" Ein asked. The boy was in his aunt's underground lab for a morning visit.

Katima leaned back on the sofa and said, "I wanted to talk with mew about the cursed magic stone."

She was referring to the sealed magic stone that Ein had purchased from Majorica. This particular stone was said to be about as old as the Dullahan, with magical power that could apparently rival that of the infamous swordsman.

"We don't really know what it's capable of, but I was feline that it wouldn't hurt to absorb a little of the stone's power."

Ein was indeed immune to toxins, but there was no guarantee that his skill also applied to curses. Would he be all right?

"Wouldn't hurt to lay our paws on it just a little. I'll remove the stone from its case."

Terrified by his aunt's nerves of steel, Ein silently nodded along. At the very least, he thought that it was worth the risk to experiment with the relic. He shifted his gaze from his aunt's paws to the cursed stone. For a moment, he thought that he heard a woman breathing.

Did I just...? No, I must be imagining things, he thought.

The boy couldn't tear his eyes away from the stone. Before he could wonder why his eyes were glued to it, his body instinctively moved towards the item.

“I’m obsessed with this stone for some arcane reason,” he murmured.

“I only just took it meowt and you’re already cursed?! Just what kind of purrrson are you?”

“I’m not cursed; I’m a normal boy. I swear.”

Ein’s half-dryad physiology and status as a reincarnator allowed him to consume magic stones. Most people like him would never call themselves “normal,” but the boy continued to insist that he was.

“Putting all that aside, do mew want to hold it in your paws for a moment?” His aunt pointed to the cursed stone. “I’ll cast a seal on this entire room if anything dangerous happens. If it comes down to it, I’ll do whatever’s necessary to dispose of the stone. From destroying it to tossing it in the trash.”

The boy felt that he wasn’t supposed to touch it, but his curiosity won out.

“I’ll absorb it just a little bit,” Ein said.

He placed the stone in his hand, but nothing happened. As Ein’s relief slowly turned into disappointment, a voice echoed throughout the room.

“I found you...”

“Meow?! Wh-Wh-What was that voice?! Return the stone right meow! Put it back in the box!”

Ein was more than happy to comply with his aunt’s instructions, but he suddenly noticed a change in his body. “Wh-What?! Why? Why are my Phantom Hands out?”

Four otherworldly appendages slowly emerged from his back before making a frenzied rush for the stone.

“Ein! Don’t do anything foolish! Put that stone into the box right meow!”

“This isn’t me! I’m not controlling these hands!”

He desperately tried to shake the stone from his hands, but his arms only brought it closer to his body. With sweat dripping from his brow, Ein’s best attempts to resist the stone were only met with feeble trembles of his body. He couldn’t fight back against this mysterious urge. Suddenly, a loud voice rang

out.

“Meow! Return it right meoooow!”

Katima tackled Ein from behind, causing the stone to fly out of his hands and back into the case. The Phantom Hands dissipated shortly before the boy fell to the floor. Overcome with a severe bout of exhaustion, Ein’s body sprawled across the ground.

“A-Aunt Katima... My body feels so heavy...”

“Well, duh! Mew created so many Phantom Hands so... Ein!”

Katima had approached the boy to make sure he was all right, but was left in a state of shock upon catching a glimpse of his hands. They were covered in strange, black armor.

“Be purrfectly honest with me! You absorbed a lot of the stone’s energy, didn’t mew?”

“No way! I didn’t absorb much of it at all!”

Katima looked down for a moment, deep in thought. This cat was most curious as to what she had just seen, but her nephew’s safety took top priority.

“Absorb this; it’s the magic stone of a Healbird. Unlike other stones, this isn’t poisonous and is used furr medicinal purposes. It’ll bring back some of your purrecious stamina.”

She passed the emerald stone into the boy’s hands. As he absorbed the stone, Ein felt a cool yet refreshing mint flavor tickle his palate before it coursed through his body.

“I should apawlogize. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do this to mew, Ein.”

“No, not at all. I agreed to this.”

“We should keep this a secret for now. I have a feline that father wouldn’t be happy with me-ow, but I shudder to fathom how your mother would react.”

Olivia treasured her son more than her own life, thus making it far too easy to imagine the severe scolding she’d have in store for the two of them. Aunt and nephew exchanged glances before staring deeply into the ground.

After leaving the lab, Ein trudged through the castle's hallways. Despite his exhaustion, the boy was captivated by the dancing sunlight that peeked through the swaying trees and into the halls. His gaze was transfixed as two familiar faces approached him.

"Good day, Your Highness. Oh dear, but you don't seem to be doing too well. You look tired."

"Why, if it isn't Sir Ein!"

"Ah... Hello, Lloyd... Majorica..." Ein replied. Majorica was wearing his usual attire—suspenders decorated with magic stones that covered his nipples. It was a questionable outfit on his part, but not even Lloyd made a peep as the suspended man was an official merchant to the castle. It didn't keep Ein from being shocked by Majorica's ensemble though. "Well you see, I was researching the cursed stone I purchased from you. That's probably why I'm looking a little tired."

"Dear me, I suppose the research isn't going well then," Majorica said as he wriggled around, accentuating his muscular upper body. Ein didn't have the strength to offer a comment.

Due to his frequent visits to the castle, Majorica became quite friendly with the boy as they got to know each other. As Ein had made his public debut from a castle window, it no longer mattered that the merchant had deduced the boy's identity when he first stepped into the store.

"I suppose that only stones of the Demon Lord and Dullahan could compare to the power of that cursed gem, Your Highness," said Majorica.

Ein widened his eyes and cocked his head to one side, for he'd never heard this comparison before.

Majorica continued. "Those two stones in particular are attracted to each other. When in close proximity, the stones of the ghoulish calamity and his right-hand man would produce a visible magic aura. This was all while the gems would try to slowly but surely close the gap between themselves."

"It's like they have a mind of their own," Ein murmured, cold sweat running

down his back. This was exactly the same as his earlier experience in Katima's lab.

"I don't think your hypothesis is too far off. That's why the Demon Lord's magic stone is sealed and kept under strict surveillance."

Apparently the ruckus died down once the stones had been separated. *Oh no... This feels like déjà vu. What should I do?* The boy thought.

"Well, I'll be heading back. Let me know immediately if anything happens, okay?" Majorica asked.

"I understand. Thank you," Ein replied.

Hearing the boy's sincerity in his voice, Majorica nodded with satisfaction. The merchant departed, leaving Ein alone with Lloyd.

Having kept quiet this whole time, the marshal finally opened his mouth to speak. "As Master Majorica stated, it'll do you no good to overexert yourself. My boy is still rather inexperienced and may not be ready to guard you within the academy's walls just yet! Ha ha ha!"

His boy? Guard me within the academy's walls? Ein's mind was flooded with questions as he blankly stared back at Lloyd. "What do you mean by 'your boy?'"

"Ah, pardon my lack of a proper explanation. You see, my only son has been tasked with guarding you on academy grounds."

Ein had never heard of this before, and he couldn't help but pose a question. "Only within academy grounds?"

"Strictly speaking from my position as a marshal, he simply lacks the power and proficiency. It's true that he is far more advanced than his peers, but I can't allow him to be at your side at all times."

So I guess Chris will continue guarding me when I'm outside. For a brief time, Ein would have a pair of bodyguards watching over him.

"If you have the time, would it be possible for me to introduce you to him this afternoon?" asked Lloyd.

"I'm free right now, so I could meet him right away if you'd like," Ein replied.

“I’m very grateful. He should be on the training grounds today, so I’d appreciate it if we could meet him there.”

Lloyd led the way, and Ein followed close behind. *What kind of person is Lloyd’s son?* The marshal boasted a grand physique while Martha was a rather small woman. Ein was curious to see what kind of child the pair had brought into the world. *What if he had Martha’s frame and Lloyd’s face?*

Unable to find the correct answer, Ein set foot inside the knights’ training grounds.

“Continue your training! Dill, wipe off your sweat and present yourself to His Highness! Make haste!” Lloyd bellowed, his commanding voice echoing within the grounds.

The knights immediately resumed their training. *He’s intense as usual...* Ein thought to himself, once again recognizing the power a marshal wielded.

“There’s Dill. He’s a knight-in-training along with being my one and only son,” Lloyd said.

The boy’s appearance greatly subverted Ein’s expectations.

“I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, Your Excellency. I am Dill Gracier, Marshal Gracier’s only son.”

On first impression, Ein thought Dill was a rather handsome boy. His small frame greatly concentrated the power of his father’s buff and substantial stature. The marshal’s son had long eyelashes, a small mouth, and neatly arranged dark green hair. Though for some reason, Ein didn’t seem to be too thrilled with his new acquaintance. *U-Ugh... Well, he seems to be a bit high-strung...*

The stern expression on Dill’s face made it plain to see that he was the serious type. Potentially the kind of kid that made one wonder if he ever cracked a smile. Especially considering that he didn’t seem to be too fond of jokes. This wasn’t a problem, but...

“To tell you the truth, Sir Ein, Dill’s position as your bodyguard is another part of your education,” Lloyd said, nodding deeply with a serious expression. “A person stationed above others must act with a certain air of authority about

them. I want you to learn about that.”

“I see... I knew this day would come,” murmured Ein.

“Indeed. I’ve also received a message from His Majesty: you mustn’t speak so formally with Dill, nor shall you show much consideration for his mood. That being said, you must still treat others with a degree of respect.”

Though Ein knew him as his grandfather, the king had given him an order.

Ein was silent for a moment. “I understand. Pleased to meet you, Dill.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Your Excellency.”

As a sign of friendship, Ein stretched out his arm for a handshake, but Dill bowed his head and refused to touch the prince.

“Um, since you’ll be by my side as my bodyguard, I don’t mind if you just call me Ein.”

“Absolutely not. I’m a simple guard and nothing more,” Dill replied in a series of dull monotones accompanied by an expressionless face.

Ein fell silent. Like a robot executing its programming, Dill bowed his head once more.

“Father—I mean—Marshal Gracier, I shall leave to run some laps outside,” said Dill.

“R-Right. Sure,” Lloyd replied.

U-Ugh... Ein thought. He had noticed that Dill didn’t approach his training with any kind of enthusiasm. The would-be guard was like a machine, only doing what he was told. A stunned Ein stared at the departing Dill.

“I know he’s my child, but he’s a rather stiff boy, isn’t he? Straitlaced and not very flexible at all unfortunately,” Lloyd said. The marshal’s descriptions were right on the money; Dill’s overly polite words and actions showed no hint of emotion. He was clearly a serious-natured boy. “For better or for worse, it seems that only his knightly capabilities grow with each passing day.”

“Um, I think he’s a wonderful person,” Ein said.

“I’m grateful that you’d say so. He’s still my pride and joy at the end of the

day. I've been training him in the hopes he'd become an excellent knight in his own right."

Ein noticed that the marshal was nothing like Rogas. It made the boy secretly wish that Lloyd had been his father instead.

"Ah, by the way, Sir Ein. Her Majesty requested to have tea with you," Lloyd said.

Ein's life in Heim was nothing compared to every day he now spent in Ishtarica. Each day was filled with new and fulfilling experiences that overwhelmed the boy with pure joy.

"My grandmother?" Ein asked. "I understand. I'll go and ask Martha about it."

Ein prayed for these joyful days to continue as he swiftly left to find Martha and have a cup of tea with his grandmother.

On this very day, almost every academy in the eponymous district would be welcoming a flock of new students. Parents in the castle town were sending off their children to school; it was the same within the walls of White Night Castle. Servants and knights alike were assembled to send off the crown prince for his first day. A slightly worried Olivia stood alongside her son.

"Are you all right? I hope you haven't forgotten anything," she said.

Each of Olivia's small but charming gestures only accentuated her luscious brunette locks and fair, almost porcelainlike skin. It was as if the area around her was struck by her undeniable beauty and the elegant dress that emphasized it. Underneath the serene smile meant to send off her child, Olivia's bosom was adorned with the very jewel her son had gifted her many moons ago. Perhaps due to the unorthodox circumstances of his birth, Ein saw his mother to be more an older sister figure in his eyes.

"I'm fine. I checked and I have everything I need. Chris will be with me until the academy too," Ein replied as he smiled.

Chris took a step forward. "Please be at ease, Lady Olivia. I shall be by his side."

Her golden, threadlike hair glittered under the morning sun. As her face broke into a squinty-eyed smile, her breathtaking allure was clear for all to see. Chris had a striking figure, from her long legs to her ample bosom. A feminine aura emanated from her uniformed figure—a seemingly intentional air that the knight had about her.

“That’s exactly why I’m worried. You’re still a bit of a klutz,” Olivia said.

“U-Ugh...” Chris mumbled. Her feeble vocalizations were in great contrast to her bold appearance, but the second princess’s comment made the knight visibly shrink.

Mother and child smiled at the knight’s embarrassment, as always.

“If it were possible, I’d love to personally accompany you to the academy district,” Olivia said.

“Y-You mustn’t! Your appearance would cause a huge stir, Lady Olivia!” Chris said hastily.

“I know.”

Unlike Ein, Olivia was well-known throughout the country. Should the second princess appear in a densely populated area such as the academy district, it wasn’t hard to imagine the ruckus her appearance would drum up.

“Has Krone already left, mother?” Ein asked.

“I believe so. The Liebe Girls’ Academy starts early,” Olivia replied before turning to her knight. “Chris, Krone left for the academy district from the castle, yes?”

“Correct. She did not leave from Sir Graff’s manor,” Chris replied.

Once winter passed, Heim’s former grand duke Graff August had purchased a manor with his own coin. However, Krone was rarely seen there. She actually spent most of her week at the castle, as it was more convenient for her lessons with Warren.

Ein would have enjoyed attending the same academy as Krone, but it wasn’t possible, unfortunately.

“Ah, Sir Ein! It’s almost time for us to depart!” Chris said with a bit of urgency

in her voice.

Ein's expression had hardened as Olivia looked at him with a sullen stare.

"It seems I must be off. Goodbye, mother!"

Olivia chuckled. "Goodbye."

The last thing Ein saw before he left the castle was his mother's saintly smile. He was guided by Chris to the royal capital's largest station—White Rose. After several minutes aboard a water train, he finally set foot in the academy district's station.

I-I'm finally here. The morning rush hour at the station was intense, tiring Ein out before his school day had even started. The view of the district was different from the scenery just outside of the castle. The neighborhood was lined with several academies, shops catering towards students, and more than a few academic facilities.

"Chris, the thought of doing this every day makes me feel like I'm already done for," Ein muttered.

"Not to worry. I'll send you off to your academy and you'll be just fine," she replied while flashing a beautiful smile. From the intense aura she exuded, one could tell that ditching school wasn't an option.

Ein wasn't planning to, but the immense pressure he felt radiating from the knight caused him to strain his smile a touch.

"It will be much easier once you arrive at the academy," Chris said. Her words were a ray of hope for the boy. "No other academy has the sheer number of educational facilities as the one that you'll be attending."

Such freedom would naturally come with more responsibilities, but that was at the bottom of the list in regard to Ein's crown princely concerns. He gave a hopeful nod and walked alongside Chris to his school. A few minutes later, a familiar face greeted him in front of the academy gates.

"I've been waiting for you, Your Excellency," Dill said. He stood coolly by the gates before he bowed his emotionless face before the pair. "Dame Christina, I shall assume the role of His Highness's bodyguard from here."

“Indeed. Protect Sir Ein with your life,” Chris replied.

“Yes ma’am.”

Ein stood on the sidelines like a bystander, feeling the exchange was much too formal.

“Now then, Sir Ein. I shall head back to the castle and return to pick up at the end of the school day. Don’t attempt to make your way home with only Dill by your side. Do you understand?” Chris said, bending her hips while she pointed her index finger into the air. Ein cracked another forced smile as Chris continued to fuss over him like a child.

“You sound like a mature older sister, but you’re still such a klutz. There’s been a leaf in your hair by the way,” Ein said.

Chris gave a cry of panic and swiftly swatted at her hair. “I-I said what I needed to! That was a message from Sir Warren!”

H-Huh? Am I not trusted at all?

“D-Don’t look at me like that! Um... I trust you, all right? However, you spend so much time with Lady Katima and...”

It was slightly depressing that the boy’s expressions could be read like an open book. Ein let out a small sigh and decided he’d learn how to maintain a poker face.

“I-In any case. I’ll pick you up this afternoon, so please wait for me at the academy gates!” said Chris.

With the knight’s departure, only Dill stood by the crown prince’s side.

“Shall we go, Your Excellency? I will guide you to your classroom,” Dill said.

“Oh, okay.”

The academy campus was home to a number of facilities, all surrounded by a sea of greenery. Some buildings stuck out right away, such as the training grounds where Ein had taken his exam and a templelike structure that had multiple spires protruding into the air. Towards the back of the campus, a small lake and field could be seen. Not far from the lake, there was also a café with an attached terrace. “Hey, Dill. Is there an entrance ceremony or anything like

one?" asked Ein.

"There is not. I shall give you a tour of the campus in the afternoon," Dill replied.

"Okay. Then I'll be waiting for you in the classroom."

As Dill had stated, no such ceremony existed in this academy. Regardless, Ein felt his excitement growing as the robotic boy guided him into the school.

The school building was so grand that it felt like a small castle. Ein set foot inside and was guided by Dill towards his classroom. The prince widened his eyes in shock.

"Here is your classroom, Your Excellency," Dill said.

A massive door of about four meters tall stood solemnly in front of them. They'd already passed by four classrooms, but this one obviously stood out from the rest. Ein couldn't help but wonder if they'd chosen the wrong door.

"This room just seems to be quite different from the others. Is this normal?" Ein asked.

"The Royal Kingsland Academy has five classes per grade," answered Dill. "The classes are divided by academic results and can only be changed once a year. The higher rank of class you're in, the more priority you're given for use of the school's facilities. These doors also indicate one's rank."

This academy's defining trait was the merit system it hinged on. *It's pretty strict. No doubt because the king, my grandfather, is involved with the management of this school.* This merit and skill-based system would have proved problematic if utilized by other institutions. However, the Royal Academy was dedicated to providing Ishtarica with its next generation of elite knights and world-class leaders. Due to the school's drive to serve the nation and its king, the Royal Academy was renowned as Ishtarica's best educational institution.

"The Fifth and Fourth Classes have twenty-five students each. The Third and Second Classes have twenty students each. You are in the First Class, Your

Excellency. Only ten students are enrolled in it,” Dill explained.

“I knew that there weren’t many students, but I didn’t think there were so few,” Ein said.

“Indeed. Now, I shall retrieve you later on.” The expressionless Dill bowed his head deeply and walked away.

Only ten people in my class? I’d be pretty depressed if I can’t get along with anyone. Ein was confident that he could generally get along with almost anyone, but he was only human. He sometimes didn’t click with certain people.

“Now how do I open this door?” he wondered.

The large door didn’t have any knobs, and he had no idea where to place his hand. In awe of the entryway, Ein took a step forward. The center of the door suddenly glowed a pale blue before the sound of creaking wood rang in the air. The door split down the middle and gave way. *Why is there such a complicated mechanism here? Aren’t I just at school?* Still shocked as to how the door opened, Ein slowly peered inside the classroom. *The room’s way too large and way too fancy...*



A large and visibly expensive semicircular table was arranged to encapsulate the teacher's desk. As he scanned the chairs that lined the semicircle, Ein's attention was grabbed by the intricate designs carved into the teacher's podium. He was tempted to tell his grandfather that the room seemed to be a bit *too* splendid. *Now, where should I sit?*

Five other students were already seated. Ein couldn't bring himself to sit at any of the open chairs in the center. After much thought, he slunk into a seat on the far right. He received a few glances before he sat down, but no one came up to talk to him.

Several minutes later, all the seats had been filled.

"Good morning, class. I'm glad everyone seems to be in attendance. It would be an ill omen for the future if we had any absentees on the first day of classes," a man said as he entered the classroom. "I wasn't supposed to be in charge of all of you, but given the resignation of a colleague, I am now your homeroom teacher."

Their new teacher was dressed in a sharp ensemble—well-tailored slacks, a white button-up shirt, black vest, and a white overcoat he held in his hand. Ein thought the man to be rather intelligent on first impression.

"This class is special and as such, I'll be requesting very little from you. There's no need to introduce yourselves to your peers either; feel free to do that on your own time. I only expect one thing from you: *quality*. Remember it well. Now then, since I have nothing further, class is dismissed," the teacher said.

Ein sat in stunned silence. *It's our first meeting, but it's already over? Our homeroom teacher has nothing more to say?*

"Whoops," the man said. He had seemingly remembered something he forgot to mention. "I actually had one more thing to share with you all. Every single one of you must attend the academy's biannual exams. If you have any extenuating circumstances pop up, I'll be more than happy to lend an ear. If you can produce good results, you won't even need to attend class."

With attendance of their daily lessons deemed completely voluntary, the class was free to do as they wished on the condition they brought in exceptional

results. This level of freedom and responsibility might have been a bit much for the group of soon-to-be eight-year-olds, but it wasn't out of the ordinary for this academy.

"If you deem it necessary, you may pose questions to the teachers. Feel free to ask for advice to your heart's content," the teacher said before naming himself. "I apologize for my late introduction. My name is Luke, and I'm primarily in charge of magic engineering. I'll be your homeroom teacher for a while. That's all I have to say for now."

Ein had expected each student to introduce themselves or hear some of the academy's history, but he heard nothing of the sort. Though he was still a bit puzzled by what just happened, it was crystal clear to him that results were everything at this school.

"Ah ha ha... Hey! That introduction was really something, wasn't it?" said a boy who sat next to Ein.

From a quick glance, it was obvious that this boy wasn't human. He was likely a werewolf, but his childlike face and friendly demeanor made him out to be more adorable than terrifying. The boy's canine ears stood up straight to attention while his tail energetically wagged from side to side.

"I'm Loran," the boy said. "I used magic engineering for my entrance exam. What did you use?"

"Swordsmanship," replied Ein. "I used it to pass the exam and enter this class."

Ein was about to introduce himself, but the prince fell silent when he saw Loran's shift in attitude.

"Then you must be the boy that everyone's talking about!" Loran howled.

There were so many possible reasons for rumors about Ein to float around the school. The prince put his metaphysical head in his hands, trying to figure out why. He had a hunch it might have involved the injuries he dealt to his entrance exam proctor.

"Is it because I defeated my proctor?" Ein asked.

“That’s right! I heard that he was a famous and successful adventurer.”

While the other students introduced themselves, Loran’s excited and loud yips echoed throughout the room. The other students started whispering to each other.

“Oh, is he *the* kid?”

“Huh, I see.”

Upon hearing his classmate’s chatter, Ein sheepishly rearranged his bangs as he gave a similarly timid response. “I fell for his taunting and I lost my cool. I’m sure people are laughing at me for it.”

The boy felt that he screwed up. He feared that people would call him dangerous whenever he became upset. The very next moment, Dill entered the classroom, as if he had arrived to save Ein.

“I’m Dill from year six. Pardon my intrusion.”

The prince had parted ways with his bodyguard mere moments ago. *Why’s he here already?* The air in the room changed drastically. While Dill’s place in the most senior class made him seem menacing, he was also rather famous for being the army marshal’s son.

“Why is Marshal Gracier’s son here?” Loran wondered. “Ah! What’s your name, by the way?”

Ein’s introduction came far too late. Figuring he missed his earlier opportunity, the prince cleared his throat. “Right, sorry about that. Um, my name is—”

Only a few seconds were needed to say his name, but Dill interrupted the pair before Ein could utter another word.

“Your Excellency, I’d forgotten to note that your first year of lessons would come with quite a bit of freedom. I was thinking of using this opportunity to give you a tour around the school.”

“Yeah... So my name’s Ein. Pleased to meet you,” the prince said to Loran.

The werewolf boy’s mouth was agape as he looked back and forth between the two boys in front of him. In a feeble effort to hide his shock, Loran closed

his snout before it sprang open once again.

“Sorry Loran, but I’m about to go on a tour. Would you care to join me?” Ein asked.

“R-Right. Ah... Sorry, but I can’t. I have a paper to turn in,” Loran said. “Oops, seems like I forgot my pen.”

“Use mine. You can return it to me later, so I’ll catch you then!”

Before leaving with Dill, Ein took a pen from his chest pocket and handed it to Loran. Loran couldn’t process what had just happened. Dill was well-known within the academy, but he had just bowed his head to one of Loran’s classmates. The name “Ein” also rang a bell for the child.

“I-Isn’t Ein the name of His Highness... The crown prince?!” Loran yelped.

Everyone in the classroom remained frozen until Ein and Dill had completely exited the room.

A while later, the conspicuous duo had finished their tour of the academy and its available facilities. They were now on their way to the cafeteria for lunch.

“And this will conclude my explanation and tour of the main facilities,” Dill said.

“Thank you. I might not use them too much, but I’m surprised to see the variety of buildings around. By the way, are you going to be guarding me during the entire school day?” said Ein. The prince was worried that doing so would take Dill away from his own studies and training.

“There are some events that I absolutely cannot miss. So I won’t be by your side all the time, but I’ll stay with you as much as I can.”

“No, no... You’re protecting me. I don’t want to be inconsiderate of your obligations, Dill.”

“There’s no need for you to feel that way. I’m but a simple knight.”

Ein gave a stiff smile and swiftly changed subjects. “Oh, who are they?” From the passageway, he saw a pair of girls sitting down on the lawn. “Are they from the First Class, but in a different grade?”

“Indeed. If you see anyone acting with that much freedom, you can safely assume that they’re Firsts.”

“I see. So Dill... Between both girls, which one is more your type?” Ein’s sudden question was his attempt at forming a closer bond with his knight.

Dill paused briefly. “What would you do with that information?”

“I want to ask questions like this from time to time so I can learn a little bit more about you.”

“I see. Understood.” The knight seemed slightly uncomfortable and furrowed his brows before he replied, “To tell you the truth, neither. At the very least, I’d prefer a woman who is much stronger than myself.”

Ah, someone like Chris? Ein thought.

“If possible, a woman who’s about as tall as Marshal Gracier. The sturdier the physique, the more charming I would find her to be.”

Ein fell silent at Dill’s unexpected response. The young knight has his sights set on a woman beyond that of the vice captain. Determined to hide his shock, the prince cracked a fake smile.

“So you fancy a woman who shares your father’s strength and sports a similar frame?” Ein asked.

“That’s correct.”

“H-Huh. I see... It might be hard to find someone like that, but I’m cheering you on.”

“Thank you. To tell you the truth, my friends would often mock me and say that I’m on an impossible mission. I’m very happy to hear your words.”

This came as no surprise. It would’ve been easier to find a drop-dead gorgeous woman than discover a lady of the marshal’s stature.

“I-It’s a bit early in the day, but would you like to have lunch with me? I’d love to keep talking with you,” Ein said as he forced another smile.

The two headed towards the café with the attached terrace. Dill opted not to eat alongside the prince and silently stood behind him.

Meanwhile, a new transfer student was garnering the attention of her peers at the nearby Liebe Girls' Academy. Krone smiled at the crowd of girls that surrounded her, but the expression plastered on her face didn't quite match what she was actually thinking.

Ugh... She thought, unsuccessful at suppressing a deep internal sigh. She had no desire to blend in with Ishtarica's aristocratic daughters. However, her stunning looks made that difficult to avoid. Most people quickly noticed her silky silvery-blue hair, fair complexion, and the star crystal that adorned her right hand. Despite her friendly features, one could sense how exhausted the girl was from a deep gaze into her amethyst eyes. Even more exhausting was the flood of offers Krone received—none of which she intended to entertain.

"If you don't mind, would you meet with my older brother?" a girl asked.

Krone was used to these troublesome arrangements, but was well aware of how to deal with them. Unfortunately, she was talking to an Ishtarican aristocrat in this situation. The status she once enjoyed as an August didn't carry the same sway as it did in Heim. Only the support of the chancellor had given her the edge in Ishtarica.

"I mustn't," Krone replied. "I'm but a mere commoner. Not suitable for a noble aristocrat such as yourself."

"Oh, but that's not true at all, Lady Krone! You have received personal approval from the chancellor himself! With your beauty, I'm sure any aristocrat would love to—"

"I'm very honored, but I'd sully the chancellor's good name should I be careless..."

Her careful phrasing made it so that even her classmate wouldn't dare to push the subject much further.

"You're right, Lady Krone. I'm so sorry. I just wanted to see if we could form a friendly relationship."

Krone sighed to herself once again and gave a smile more elegant than the blooming flora. "Oh no, please don't be so bothered. I'm delighted to know that

you think so highly of me.”

I'd probably be made into a concubine anyways. She knew that no aristocrat would welcome a commoner as a formal family member. More than anything, Krone had no desire to go along with any scheme of the like.

Liebe Girls' Academy was a fantastic place. Though the rules were quite strict, it was an ideal environment to nurture the perfect lady. More importantly, the institution was an excellent resource to aid Krone with her lofty goals.

“I'm pleased to meet all of you. I hope we can become good friends,” Krone said.

Since she was a transfer student, her time at the academy wouldn't be long. By the end of her first day, Krone was determined to do the most with the time she had there.

The warmth of spring was now rolling into the academy district, but things were a bit frostier at the knight's station and adjoining prison on the royal capital's outskirts.

“Someone escaped from prison?” a knight asked. This particular knight was the chief in charge of the station.

A criminal who was incarcerated roughly two weeks ago had seemingly disappeared from his cell. The chief and his knights stood in front of the muggy, damp cell as they searched for clues.

“How did they escape? Has no one noticed anything unusual?” the chief asked.

“Nothing. We're not even sure when he escaped,” a knight replied.

The stone cell was quite durable and fashioned with a magical tool as its lock. Only the lock's matching tool would open it. Guarded at all times, this key was only accessible to a select few, including the chief himself. It was impossible to make a jailbreak without some outside help.

“In any case, investigate this matter immediately and report back to the castle!” the chief ordered before he barked more orders to the other knights.

“Bring me a list of all the knights who have recently guarded this cell!”

“Yessir!”

As the knights rushed to execute their orders, the chief stared at the empty cell grimly. *If I remember correctly, the criminal kept here was...* “Freed the Sloth. An ex-adventurer proficient with shortswords.”

A member of the rare nonhuman species known as vampires, Freed the Sloth was a vile criminal who left the bodies of many in his wake. Money was the only motivation for his heinous crimes, with reports indicating that he primarily dirtied his hands for wealthy clientele.

“I’ve always enjoyed sucking the blood of my victims,” Freed was known to have said.

“We must capture him quickly,” the chief muttered. He slapped his cheeks before hastily making his way out of the prison.

Chapter One: A Lively Academic Life

A few days had passed since Ein started school and the boy was spending part of his day off in the treasury. Considering it'd been a while since he last set foot in the room, he was accompanied by a trio of ladies on this visit.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" Olivia said.

One of the other women who accompanied them was an enchantress with brown locks not dissimilar to Olivia's. The woman was mumbling as she searched the treasury. "Where did I place that shortsword? I'd been meaning to give it to you, Ein..." Her name was Lalalua. Given that she was often referred to as the queen, it was quite easy to piece together that she was King Silverd's only wife. She was also of a nonhuman species known as Dark Elves. Though quite old by human standards, she appeared to be young as can be—an unmistakable elven trait.

The clacking of Lalalua's heels against the floor echoed throughout the room as she ventured deeper into the treasury. Ein's last chaperone, Chris, finally spoke up as though she had just remembered something.

"Your Majesty, perhaps the shortsword is amongst the weapons stored over there," the knight said, pointing to a row of jewel-encrusted swords and golden spears. The spread of luxurious weapons were lined up neatly.

"Oh, could that be it?" said Lalalua.

Am I really allowed to have a shortsword from the treasury? They all look so expensive, Ein thought. They had made a trip to the treasury because his grandmother wanted to give the boy a gift. The queen had found what she was looking for and picked up a black box.

"I shall bestow this upon you, Ein. It must be something grand if it's going to be sheathed on the crown prince's waist," Lalalua proclaimed.

The rectangular box was around sixty centimeters in length. Since it only contained the weapon, it was thin and easy to carry.

“May I open it?” Ein asked.

“Of course. It’s your sword, after all,” the queen replied.

“Thank you. Then without further ado...”

Ein placed the box onto a nearby pedestal and unlocked the metal clasp. He opened the lid and peered inside.

“This blade is indeed fitting for a Dark Knight,” he murmured.

The weapon had a black, dull luster and a crimson jewel was embedded into the hilt. The blade’s breathtaking beauty made it suitable to be a display piece in a museum. It was a splendid sword with no inauspicious airs about it.

“Oh, mother! You’ve found the perfect blade for my child!” cried Olivia.

“Of course. He absorbed the Dullahan’s magic stone, so I thought this would be the most suitable weapon for him,” Lalalua said with a smile.

While the two ladies chattered excitedly, Chris could only eke out a strained smile.

“Ummm... What a wonderful shortsword, Sir Ein,” she said with a dry laugh. The knight wasn’t sure how to offer praise.

“I was a bit surprised, but I quite like this sword,” Ein said.

“I-Is that so? Then I’m quite relieved!” Chris replied.

This blade is comfortable in my hands. It feels like an extension of my arm. While grateful for Chris’s thoughtful words, Ein was shocked by how snug the jet-black blade felt in his grasp. The weight, grip, and feel of the blade were perfect.

“Thank you for such a lovely sword, grandmother!” Ein said. He took out the black scabbard and belt that were nestled within the box. He sheathed the weapon and placed it around his waist—an exact fit for the small boy.

“It suits you so well, Ein! A man of the royal family should carry a sword with him at all times,” Lalalua said.

Chris, on the other hand, looked slightly worried. “Um, it seems there’s no need for you to sharpen your sword. Please be careful so that you don’t injure

yourself, Sir Ein.”

“I’ll be fine. I get carried away with Aunt Katima sometimes, but I know that I’m holding a dangerous blade,” the prince replied.

“I do believe you handle dangerous concoctions for Lady Katima’s research, but I’m relieved to hear you say that.”

“Oh, Ein. Once again, you’ve become even more magnificent,” Olivia said.

Both Lalalua and Chris had become accustomed to the sight of the second princess wrapping her child in a tight hug. After the wholesome scene, the group made their way out of the treasury. Ein was ecstatic to have received such a marvelous weapon—a blade beyond his wildest dreams.

“And here’s the sword my grandmother gave me,” Ein explained.

“I see,” Krone replied. “That seems to be a rather sudden gift, but I’m happy for you. It suits you quite well.”

The pair were engrossed in conversation while they sat with Katima in her underground lab. The cait-sìth had dragged the kids down to the basement after suddenly interrupting the duo’s chat in his room.

“Meow... I feel bad for imposing on your conversation, but would mew have any good suggestions?”

As she gave a weak meow, Katima stretched out across them on the sofa. She was taking another crack at researching the cursed stone.

“D-Do mew have any ideas, Krone? Unlike my nephew, you’re a smart kid!”

Though Ein was slightly irritated by his aunt’s biting remarks, he bit his tongue when Krone attempted to offer a reply.

“I won’t be able to provide much insight as an outsider, but perhaps you’ll find something within the library of the Royal Academy?” she suggested.

“Hm... It does have quite the varied and vast collection of books... That I’m pawsitive of.”

Unfortunately, Katima had returned empty-handed in her previous visits to

the library. The cat slumped into her shoulders while Krone looked on. The girl's head was cocked to the side as she racked her brain for a helpful idea.

"Do you have any suggestions, Ein? If you ask me, I think you know way more than I do," she said.

"That's a kind compliment, but I'd probably think of the same solution," Ein replied.

Katima sighed. "This crown prince is so useless... Me-owww?! Ein?! Stop that right meow! You know my ear-fur is sensitive! Mrow!"

The boy's irritated yanking of her ears left Katima needing to catch her breath.

"Meow... Goodness... I've got such a short-tempered nephew."

"A-Are you all right, Lady Katima?" asked Krone.

"Of course! My nephew's hiss-terical antics are old hat for me!"

While she was sympathetic with Ein, Krone sided with his aunt. "You mustn't be so violent, Ein." Her tone was calm and she sported a serene expression on her face.

"I know, I know. I won't do it anymore."

"Hm, then I'd like to be more convincing than that." Krone's stare loosened before she flashed a smile. "I haven't had the time to be bored since I arrived here. Every day is another merry moment."

"Mrow? Is that all thanks to me-ow?"

Krone chuckled. "That's right. I must express my gratitude to you, Ein, and all within the castle."

"I'm glad to hear that, my fur-end!"

Now in high spirits, Katima had seemingly forgotten about the ear tugging and popped a piece of fruit into her jowls. Sounds of the juicy fruit being crunched and sloshed around the cat's mouth filled the room until there was a knock at the door.

"Seems like someone's here. I'll get it," Ein said.

“I’ll leave it to mew!”

Upon opening the door, Ein was greeted by the sight of Chris with a small wooden box in her hand.

“S-Sir Ein! I didn’t know you were here,” she said.

“Yep. I know I just saw you, but did you have something for Aunt Katima?”

“I actually have a package for her.” She entered the room and approached the first princess. “And here you are. This package came with a message: ‘Thank you for your patience.’”

“Mrow?! Finally!” Katima nabbed the box and broke out into a little dance routine on top of the sofa. “Thank mew! Oh, and there’s something I’d like to send out. It’s on my desk, so could mew check it before mew leave, pawlease?”

“Certainly.”

“Thanks! The mailing addresses have been noted on that scrap of papurr. Feel furree to take a quick look!”

Katima popped up a single claw and used it to surgically open the package. A book resting on a bed of silk was nestled inside.

“M-Meow... This book is far too showy. I can feel some real hiss-tory surrounding it...”

“Is this an expensive book, Aunt Katima?”

Happy to receive such a question, the first princess gave an enthusiastic reply. “It took me-ow many months to get my paws on this tome! Don’t be shocked when mew hear its price! I basically used a year’s worth of my money to make this purrchase!”

This book had cost even the first princess a pretty penny. Though it seemed to cost her almost an entire year of her allowance, Katima didn’t show an ounce of buyer’s remorse. In fact, she was trembling with excitement.

“Lady Katima, what kind of book is that?” asked Krone.

“Well, I’m glad mew asked! This book was written by an elf who risked their life to put pen on paper.”

The elf had apparently spent their lifetime chronicling the Demon Lord's experiments and documented the results in great detail. No other tome could dream of containing these kinds of insights.

"What a splendid cover!" Katima gushed.

A dwarven master craftsman had bound the book in leather. Beautiful and solemn, it was difficult to tell if the embossed pattern was stamped on or carved into the material. Katima guessed that the leather was made from a scaleless dragon. As such, it went without saying that the material was extremely valuable.

"It's so grand... It's even got me feline a little nervous." She nabbed a pair of gloves from her lab coat and squeezed them onto her paws. "Is it all right for me-ow to read it a little?"

"Sure, I don't mind," Ein replied. Before he had the chance to ask if he could leave with Krone, his aunt had become engrossed in the book.

"Hmmm... I knew it would be purrplexing and difficult to read..."

As Katima mumbled to herself, Ein knew that his words would now fall on deaf ears. He sighed and Krone gave a forgiving smile.

"I'll pour us another cup of tea. I'll have you know that I've gotten quite good at it," she said.

"Your tea has always been delicious, but you're learning about it at the girls' academy?"

"No, I've actually been secretly training under Martha."

Martha was an excellent teacher. She was the second-in-command over White Night's servants and the second princess's personal maid. No one doubted her skills as those abilities had propelled Martha to where she was today. Ein nodded in understanding, knowing that Krone was in good hands.

"Here you are," Krone said as she quickly prepared another cup of tea.

Ein smacked his lips in satisfaction. "This is wonderful."

"Heh heh... I'm glad. I'm pleased to know that it suits your taste, Your Highness."

While the lovebirds enjoyed each other's company, Katima furrowed her brows in confusion. She'd gone through painstaking effort to obtain this book, but it proved difficult for her to decipher.

"Meow... This is gonna take a while..."

"What's wrong?" asked Ein.

"It's hard to read... Mew see, this book is written in a troublesome and ancient Elven alphabet. Only a handful of elves know of these characters."

"Why don't you see if Chris can read it?"

"This alphabet was mewsed many centuries ago. There's no way a royal-capital-born-and-bred elf like Chris could read this."

Having apparently heard her name, Chris called out from behind Katima's desk. "Did you call for me, Lady Katima?"

"Nope! Keep pawrusing that papurr I gave mew!"

"Roger! I shall do so."

"Well, meow I need to find someone who can read this," Katima mumbled. Just as she was about to give up, an illustration caught her eye. "Hmmm? Interesting. This book has more information on the Demon Lord than any other I've come across. I suspected its existence, but I didn't think I would litter-ally hit it right on the head."

Katima leaned over to the kids with the book open on a specific page. "Isn't this a first fur mew all too?"

"Aunt Katima?! Is this..."

"Indeed. I've never seen this image before either, but I'm pawsitive this is the owner of the stone you absorbed. The Dullahan."

A member of the Demon Lord's inner circle, the Dullahan was portrayed as a gorgeous, masculine man with a flowing mane of silver hair trailing behind him. Ein felt a strange kind of resemblance between himself and the man.

"I didn't know the Dullahan was so humanlike," Krone noted.

"Y-Yeah," Ein remarked. "I'm just as surprised."

“Meow... I’d love to read more about him and not just flick through these images...” Katima looked impatient, devastated that she couldn’t read a book she finally had in her paws. “I guess I really will need to find someone to read it...”

Katima set the open book on a table and leaped to her feet, causing her lab coat to dramatically flutter behind her. “You two! I know I called mew all here and you have my deepest apawlogies, but I must be off!”

“I thought so,” Ein said before turning to Krone. “Should we head back up?”

“Yes, I believe that would be best,” the girl replied.

“Chris! Once you’re done reading that list, could mew pawlease put the largest item outside the door?”

“Understood! Do take care!” the knight responded.

Chris stayed behind as the trio left the research facility.

A short while later, Chris finished confirming the items on the list and set the largest one out by the door as requested. Once she finished up, the knight noticed an open book resting on the table.

“Is this Lady Katima’s new book? Seems costly,” Chris murmured to herself.

The knight thought it would be bad for the book’s spine to remain open and picked the tome up to close it. However, she was taken with the ornate cover and found herself scanning the open pages.

““My findings on the true nature of the Demon Lord and his inner circle.’ Huh,” she said. She was able to make out the title jotted down in ancient Elven.

The book’s contents had piqued her curiosity. She randomly flipped through the pages before stopping at an illustration of a breathtaking woman.

“She’s a beauty...” Chris muttered. She stared at the image of a woman clad in a black robe and an assortment of jewelry. The woman’s robe looked like it might have been a magical tool, but the large staff she wielded was far more eye-catching. Her lips appeared to be just a taste of her unbelievable allure.

“Is she a witch? No... She’d look like a skeleton if that were the case...”

Chris had been taught of ancient monsters while she grew up in her hometown. The image floated around the knight's mind until she finally recalled the woman's identity.

"Right, I think she was an Elder Lich..." She stared at the illustration once more before closing the book. Now humming a happy tune, Chris folded her hands behind her back and skipped out of the lab.

Chris was told that this Elder Lich was the most adept magician in existence. Due to the monster's sheer power, it would be no surprise if she had a place within the Demon Lord's inner circle. Though the Demon Lord's posse had caused the nation to tremble in fear, the knight was fixated on something else. *Her lips were so plump*, Chris thought as she nonchalantly remembered the illustration.

"So sleepy," the knight said before letting out a yawn and quickly ascending the stairs.

The next day after school, Ein had a question for Dill as he prepared to head home.

"Do you know why my original homeroom teacher quit so suddenly?" Ein asked.

Now walking alongside the prince, Dill furrowed his brows. "We can't be so public with this information, but that man was fired from the academy."

"Fired?"

"Correct. He displayed questionable behavior that ran contrary to the academy's principles. Specifically, he clearly discriminated commoners from the aristocrats. He was scheduled to be the homeroom teacher for your class of first-year Firsts, Your Excellency. With that in mind, I cooperated in the man's background check before reporting the results to my father and other personnel. Notably, he was in charge of pharmaceuticals and quite knowledgeable about toxins secreted by monsters."

Following a thorough investigation with findings from other faculty members, Silverd and the board of directors came to a decision: the termination of Wolf

Magnus's employment.

"Wolf is the third son of a marquess. Given our household's friendly relationship with House Magnus, my father took it upon himself to inform Wolf of his dismissal. I was told he tried to deliver the news with great delicacy, but I think he was being too soft. He should be far more stringent as a duke and the master of the house."

"There's no helping it," Ein said. "He was up against a marquess, and things aren't so simple."

"Wolf was resting on his laurels without fully understanding the responsibilities of his role as an aristocrat. It's something I greatly dislike." Dill wore a disgruntled expression. The young knight was pondering the difficulties of dealing with a man from such a famous family.

"And what's Magnus up to now?"

"Quality is quality, no matter the situation...not to mention he's part of a well-known household. I last heard that he was given a leisurely post where he keeps track of the knights' schedules. A trifling task, to say the least."

Keeping a schedule up to date was a rather important role, but the task itself wasn't very fulfilling. Even Ein could tell that Wolf's bloodline had spared him, allowing him to take the post despite the reluctance of others. *Dill doesn't smile at all, but is it due to his extreme sense of justice?* Wolf had been too braggadocian for simply being born as an aristocrat. Ein was all too familiar with Dill's aversion to those kinds of people.

"I'm not a fan of that behavior either," Ein said. "I might be part of the royal family, but I've never thought of gloating about it, nor do I want to."

"Very good. That's a splendid mindset to have," Dill responded, his reply sounding uncharacteristically cheerful.

"Thanks. If possible, I'd like to deepen our friendship. Perhaps call each other by our names—" Ein felt that this was the perfect opportunity to address this matter. *I think he might go along with it.*

"I believe these matters are completely separate. I'm just your guard, so I request your leniency around that topic."

“You didn’t have to cut me off,” Ein grumbled. “Fine.”

“It seems Dame Christina is already waiting for you. Please excuse me.”

Having just arrived at the academy gates, Dill bowed his head and made his leave. Ein walked to Chris’s side, filled with a determination to have the young knight refer to him by name one day.

The academy district’s main street was hustling and bustling as classes had just ended for the day.

While escorting Ein, Chris suddenly piped up. “Ah, if you’d pardon me, Sir Ein.”

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

“I need to pass along a message to the knights making the rounds. Would you mind if I borrow a quick slice of your time to take care of this?”

“Go ahead! Seems like there’s a knight over there.”

In lieu of the silver and white uniforms worn by the castle’s knights, the streetwise spearmen on patrol wore light armor over their blue fatigues.

“I apologize for the inconvenience, Sir Ein. Please take care to stay close to me,” Chris said.

The vice captain walked up to a beat knight standing by a nearby tree. As the knights conversed, Ein surveyed his surroundings. *There’s so many people around.* Ein was less than excited about the afternoon rush hour awaiting him at the station. He didn’t want to think about it, but braving the crowds was the only way to hop on a train bound for home. The boy let out a deep sigh, but soon noticed an odd occurrence within the academy district. A pair of students from the Liebe Girls’ Academy seemed to be involved in an altercation with a trio of men. Guardless, the girls held each other as they trembled in fear.

“Guess I should help them,” Ein muttered to himself.

He headed to the girls without giving Chris a heads-up. Bystanders looked on in worry, but Ein was the first person to take action.

“They seem to be a bit spooked. Would you kindly leave them be?” Ein said as he put himself between the girls and their harassers. He felt embarrassed for

cutting in with such a cliché line. He glanced towards the female students, signaling that they were free to leave.

“Th-Thank you so much!”

“We’ll surely repay our debt to you!”

Feeling his little stunt to be on the pretentious side, Ein was worried that the men would see right through him. *Are you guys mad that I got in the middle of this?* The boy thought as he stared at the trio. *Why would you hit on these girls? There’s no way; these guys are way too old.* If one were to be kind, these men were in their late twenties at the youngest. Again, way too old for girls who looked to be around Krone’s age.

The largest man out of the three was the first to speak. “You think you’re so great ‘cause you’re loaded? You get off acting like a prince or somethin’?”

“Acting? Well, whatever,” Ein said. “I stepped in because they seemed to be scared.”

“We were talkin’ about some *important* matters. An important, costly topic, you see.”

Oh, so they weren’t trying to pick up schoolgirls. Ein felt a bit relieved, but it didn’t resolve the issue at hand. “But they didn’t like you.”

This was the bottom line for Ein. Worried whispers could be heard all around as the boy started to attract a crowd. The people were waiting to see what he was going to do. After all, it was three against one with the prince at a clear disadvantage. The crowd didn’t have much time to weigh the odds as the hefty man wound up a punch.

“You’re the one that started it,” Ein remarked.

“Shut up. What do I care?!” The man’s beefy swing whizzed through the air, targeted directly at the boy’s face.

The knights at the castle are much faster. Makes sense. The boy didn’t even need to draw his shortsword. He turned to one side, swiftly dodging the attack, and tugged the man backwards.

“Hey! What— Ow!”

With a booming thud, the man slammed into the ground jaw-first. The pain from the impact had the sack-of-potatoes-shaped man writhing in agony. “Wait! That’s a Royal Academy kid!”

“So what?! It’s us two studs against that squirt! Rush him!” bellowed another goon.

The number didn’t matter to Ein. He’d been trained to beat the castle’s knights—thugs didn’t stand a chance. However, Ein’s attitude instantly pulled a one-eighty.

“Uh... S-Sorry...” the boy said as he gave a nervous smile.

The goons grinned in delight under the presumption that the boy was begging for his life, but Ein wasn’t looking at them. His gaze was fixated on a pair of eyes that could kill like frostbite. Unfamiliar with the sensations the glacial gaze inspired, Ein blinked to discover they had disappeared. In a flash, an elven avalanche of murderous intent crushed the dopey duo.

“I’m troubled as to how I should lecture you. Your act was very noble indeed, but you should’ve told me before you ran off on your own. What do you think?”

“You’re exactly right,” Ein said as he looked at Chris, who now stood in front of him.

The goons were taken aback by the sudden appearance of the blonde beauty before she unceremoniously beat them to the ground. The pathetic pair now lay unconscious and foaming at the mouth.

“When did you knock them out?” the prince asked.

“They were already out by the time I appeared before you,” Chris said with a sigh. “Goodness, you’re such a handful.” The murderous, ice-cold glimmer had left her eyes.

“I couldn’t leave those girls to fend for themselves, but you’re right. I should’ve called out to you first.”

“As long as you understand that. However, I will be reporting this to His Majesty, Lady Olivia, and Lady Krone. Is that clear?”

Ein didn’t want that, but he was out of excuses. He hung his head and nodded

while onlookers cheered for the prince and his knight.

That night, Ein was stuck in the castle library. He was forced to draft a written apology and had a stack of paper piled next to him.

“I’m finally done! Fifty pages is excessive!” Ein exclaimed.

With a few taps on the table, Chris gathered the papers into a bundle. A smirking Krone sat across from the prince.

“Good work,” Krone said. “But I also believe you were in the wrong. Hmm, Ein?”

“Precisely. I think this punishment from His Majesty is far too light,” Chris said.

“You’re both rallying against me!” Ein replied. “I already sat through a long lecture, so please forgive me.”

Along with a swift knock to the head from the king himself, Ein’s punishment was to write a fifty-page apology due at the end of the day. Even his mother didn’t cover for him, opting to give her son a lengthy lecture. Ein had made his deadline as it was just before midnight.

“Is there anything you’d like for me to relay to His Majesty?” asked Chris.

“Please tell him that fifty pages is too much,” Ein replied.

Chris fell silent.

“Sorry, I misspoke. Please tell him that I’m sorry.”

“Understood,” the knight said with a sigh. “You’ve done well.”

Ein groaned and stretched in his chair.

“You mustn’t do something like this again. I’m also of the opinion that it was dangerous,” Krone said.

“I’m sorry. I should have told Chris before rushing in to help.”

“That’s right. Don’t ever forget that for next time.”

Ein nodded and a brief silence fell upon the room until she spoke once more.

“But I think your actions today were very in character.”

“Hm? Is that a compliment?”

“I wonder... I can’t say it’s a trait I hate.”

“I see. Then maybe you’re praising me.”

Krone was so in love with Ein that she didn’t have the heart to rake him over the coals. Chris would have preferred the girl to be a bit sterner with the prince.

“You both are so smart. I simply don’t understand...” Chris weakly muttered.

The pair glanced back at each other and smiled.

“Are you having fun at school? Is it going well?” Ein asked.

“It certainly has been,” Krone replied. “Everyone has been so kind and thanks to Sir Warren’s efforts, I haven’t fallen behind on my studies.”

“That’s wonderful. Let me know if anything happens.”

She chuckled. “Thank you.”

Feeling like a third wheel, Chris stood up abruptly and tried to leave. “I’ll deliver your apology to His Majesty.”

With his punishment fully drafted, Ein left the library and Krone followed behind him. The trio ended up bumping into Warren on the way out.

“Ah, hello Warren,” Ein said.

“Oh, it seems that you’ve finished your punishment. What good timing,” the chancellor remarked.

Warren appeared to have some business with the boy. Chris handed the apology to the chancellor, after which he cleared his throat and straightened his posture.

“It’s perfect that the two of you are together. We just finished interrogating the men behind this afternoon’s ruckus and I’m here with a status report,” Warren said.

The air grew tense.

“Those men were ex-adventurers. They claimed to have left the profession,”

Warren explained.

“Ah, no wonder they loitered around like hooligans,” Chris said. She was starting to catch on to something.

Warren leaned in to provide some insight to the confused kids. “Those who cannot make a living as an adventurer will often take on unrelated odd jobs. Anything from bodyguarding to under-the-table arrangements, and even robbery.”

Not all former adventurers turned to a life of crime, but it wasn’t uncommon.

“It’s still odd that they decided to fleece the academy district,” Chris observed.

“Precisely. There are many aristocratic bodyguards and knights patrolling the area. It’s quite rare for ex-adventurers to wander off on their own for prolonged periods of time.”

“Why don’t we increase the number of knights on patrol? We have Sir Ein and Lady Krone to consider.”

Ein had a feeling that trouble was brewing. He silently turned to Krone, who seemed to share his worries.

“The full details are listed in these handouts. Let me know if you have any questions,” Luke said.

Ein was thumbing through a good number of documents he’d been given during this mandatory homeroom meeting. *What is this? Wow.* The seemingly normal pieces of parchment had illustrations and letters moving about as if they were alive. Much to Ein’s surprise, the academy utilized this arcane technology as a part of its initiative to make important information fully accessible to all students.

“Wh-Whoa... I’ve never seen this before,” Loran whimpered. The prince’s fluffy neighbor couldn’t keep his ears from trembling in awe.

After scanning over the handouts, Ein was keenly interested in one tidbit of information. *An academy district competition?* A week from today, all

academies throughout the district would gather together for a competition intended to cultivate friendships across academies. Students would face off in a multitude of contests, including debates and duels of the blade or wand. With such an important event on the horizon, Ein wondered why they only received a week's advance notice.

"I guess that's par for the course for this academy," he mumbled.

"Hm? Did you say something, Ein?" Loran asked as his ears perked up in excitement.

"Ah, no, nothing at all."

"Oh yeah! Sorry for holding on to this for so long! I've been meaning to return it to you."

"Return? Did I lend you something?"

"Yeah! You let me borrow your pen on the first day of school!" Loran retrieved a brown bag from one of his pockets. He'd been keeping the pen inside it ever since.

"I completely forgot. You didn't have to put it in a bag and all."

"We're friends! I should return items to friends neatly and— Whoops. You're the crown prince... I might get in trouble if I casually refer to you as a friend..."

Ein widened his eyes in shock. *Friend? Wait... He's right! Loran is my very first friend.* He hadn't fully processed this fact until it was verbalized.

"Don't worry about it; we're friends. I'd appreciate it if you remained casual and friendly with me," Ein said.

"Are you sure? I kinda felt bad since I'm in no position to be friends with royalty..."

Loran seemed a bit worried about calling the crown prince a friend of his, but Ein gave a firm reply. "That doesn't matter. I'd be much happier if you'd speak with me as you always have." He shifted topics. "Oh, looks like it's time to head out, though."

"Yeah. I'll be heading over to Professor Luke's lab. Where are you going, Ein?"

“The training grounds. I have to keep honing my swordsmanship.”

Ein primarily spent his school days within the training grounds. Though students could polish their skills in a wide variety of martial arts, this facility went far and above just that. It was well stocked with equipment, weapons, and incredibly rare magical tools. In a few cases, some of these tools were the only ones of their kind in Ishtarica. From its stone floor arena to its training dummies, the academy’s training grounds were home to any tool a would-be warrior could need.

The lone prince was greeted by an instructor as the boy set foot on the grounds.

“Oh, there you are,” the man said while chomping on a cigar. The instructor primarily focused on swordsmanship and was quite popular among students for his friendly demeanor.

“I was thinking of training again. Is it open?” Ein asked.

“The summoning platform? Yep.”

The instructor pointed his thumb to a small glass room that lived off to a corner of the facility.

“Yeah. I feel like it’s the only reason I come to school these days,” Ein said.

“Cheeky as always, eh? Go on and get ready.”

The scruffy-looking man haphazardly wore a ratty, stretched-out shirt and desperately needed to shave his stubble. This sight for sore eyes went by the name Kaizer and was the very man Ein had roughed up during the entrance exams. In sharp contrast to the boy’s first impression of the man, Kaizer was well known for taking care of his students. *I remember the first time I saw him after the exam. How nostalgic.*

“Oh, there you are.” were Kaizer’s rather casual words upon their second meeting.

Ein wasn’t able to hide his surprise at the time, but he now saw the man as nothing but an amazing teacher.

“Hey, what do you wanna do today?” Kaizer called out leisurely.

There was no need for formalities on campus and neither position nor rank carried any weight within the academy's institutional structure. Silverd personally saw to it that the crown prince was treated like any other student, without exception.

"Uhhh, could I please have a Red Bison today?" Ein replied.

"Precocious, aren't we? Gimme a bit."

Ein had feasted on the succulent flavors of the White Bison's magic stone in the past, but the beast's Red Bison cousins tasted rancid in comparison. According to Kaizer, Bison with freshly awakened murderous intent were of the Red variety and considered to be of a separate species.

"Can I ask a question, Instructor Kaizer?" Ein inquired. The boy had already equipped a bit of gear and nabbed a wooden sword before approaching Kaizer.

"Hm? What's up?" Kaizer asked.

"From the viewpoint of a full-fledged adventurer, just how dangerous is a Red Bison?"

"If you're moderately trained, you shouldn't have too much trouble with two people. One of you would be used as bait."

"Huh. I see."

"Which is why no young boys like yourself, or anyone else in this academy really, should be allowed to face it."

"Then I wonder why they let me do it here..."

Ein swung open the glass door and entered the room with Kaizer right behind him. The disheveled instructor navigated through the words and images displayed on a large flat screen. *What mysterious technology.* Ein wasn't about to fight an actual monster, but a hologram of one. This stone guzzler of a magical tool was referred to as a summoning platform. The device would pull the information stored within a magic stone at a blistering rate before creating a construct based on it. At the present moment, the Red Bison was the highest class monster available to summon. Due to the device's astronomical maintenance costs, only three of these cutting edge platforms existed in the

country.

“A castle knight should be able to defeat one on their own,” said Kaizer. “If you become a member of the Knights Guard, you’d be able to best it with ease.”

“So two veteran adventurers are equal to about one of the castle’s knights?” Ein asked.

“Roughly.”

To further elaborate, a member of the Knights Guard wielded the might of about four or five normal knights.

“A member of the Knights Guard has strength on par with that of a highly ranked adventurer,” Kaizer said.

“Then what about you?” asked Ein.

“If I’m not limited to just swords, I can handle about ten members of the Guard at once. An adventurer never relies on their blade alone—they need to be cunning and use everything at their disposal in a battle.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.”

Kaizer sighed at Ein’s innocent comments. “Don’t you have your weird skill, Ein? You should be able to excel in combat if you use it. Unless you can beat a Knights Guard member with just your swordsmanship.”

Ein stayed silent for a moment before he replied. “I did win against them at the start of the year.”

“Hah! You’re truly the strangest crown prince I’ve ever known! Norms don’t seem to apply to you. Go on; the platform’s good to go.”

A magic circle marked on the ground suddenly glowed in sky-blue hues. It was a signal that the boy’s opponent was about to appear.

“Considering these monsters are just illusions, why do they still pack a punch?” Ein wondered.

“No clue. Ask the guy who made the tool if you have questions like that.”

“Okay.”

Kaizer's exploits had won him the respect of many, Lloyd included. Thanks to that fame, Kaizer was able to immediately take a teaching job at the Royal Academy following a career-ending injury.

It's coming. A Red Bison slowly emerged from the ground. When fully conjured, the beast's muscular, crimson-bristled body towered at over two meters. A pair of gnarly, thick, and sharp horns protruded from its head. The bison let out a booming grunt as it exhaled, flaring its nostrils in the process. It now targeted the boy that dared to summon it.

"It's an illusion, so its attacks won't injure you, but you might get blown back with a bruise or two for your troubles," Kaizer said. "That's on you though."

"Got it! I'll be careful!" Ein replied.

Kaizer stepped outside to watch the boy's mock battle. The instructor could watch on from a distance without worry. He knew that the device's safety features would prevent Ein from taking too hard a hit.

The bison's loud bellowing rang throughout the room. The bovine's cry sounded like that of a cow's, but the intensity of its wailing and loud thumping of its hooves made it anything but. It pointed its twisted horns at Ein and dug its feet into the ground, preparing to charge.

Ein calmly gazed back at his foe. "I'm tired of that!" When the Red Bison rushed at him, the boy kicked the ground with one foot and leaped off to the side. Unable to change its path, the beast charged forward. Then in a flash, Ein used his wooden sword and made sharp incisions in the bison's legs. A dull thud accompanied by whimpering could be heard.

"You're full of openings when you try to turn around!"

The crown prince had learned that Red Bison couldn't make sharp turns, leaving them open for a full assault following the beast's initial charge. With a swing of his blade, Ein dealt a devastating blow to the monster's head. The Red Bison groaned in pain and fell on its side with a loud thud. The defeated beast transformed into beads of light before it dissipated into the air.

His training session was far from over; Ein faced the crimson terror another

three times before calling it a day. He was used to dealing with the monster, but he liked the thrill of facing a foe.

“I’m done! Would you kindly grade today’s training?” Ein asked as he left the glass room. His smile made it seem as if his workout had refreshed him.

“Thirty points, you idiot,” Kaizer replied.

Ein couldn’t believe that he received such low marks. “But I defeated them all! Isn’t your scoring a bit too strict?!”

“You had near perfect marks until you faced the last bison. You slashed its legs and aimed for the head. All good tactics, but,” Kaizer said, inhaling deeply before he jabbed his index finger right into Ein’s forehead. “Who on God’s green earth would take a Red Bison’s charge head-on?! Are you an *idiot*?!”

Against his fourth bison, Ein had deftly grabbed the beast by horns and wrangled it into submission with pure strength.

“Right here, sir... Ow! Ouch! You’re hurting me!” Ein cried.

“Of course I have an issue with that!” Kaizer roared.

“B-But it might come in handy one day! What’ll happen if I’m forced to fight a powerful monster head-on?!”

“Use your head so you’ll never, *ever* end up in that situation!”

Ein frowned as he placed his hand over his forehead. He couldn’t fight his instructor’s sound logic. However, Kaizer couldn’t help cracking a small grin. He’d once again realized that the crown prince was truly an exceptional boy.

“Ugh, that hurt...” the prince muttered.

A boy looked at the duo from a short distance away. “Th-That was awesome... You took the Red Bison’s attack head-on. That was so cool.”

Ein recognized this boy with fiery red hair and an energetic demeanor. He had actually run into the kid a few times in class, but didn’t catch the boy’s name.

“Hey, Butz,” Kaizer said. “You’re here to stink up the training grounds too, right?”

Ah... So that’s his name.

“I-I also wanna fight the Red Bison!” Butz said.

“I don’t mind, but it might be a bit too soon for you,” the instructor replied.

“That’s fine by me! A man’s gotta take the challenge!”

Kaizer reluctantly shook his head and started the preparations. Ein really liked Butz’s frank personality; it was like a breath of fresh air to the prince.

“If you’re gonna challenge yourself, you better not hold back. Hmm, seems like you’re already wearing your gear. Do some stretching first so you don’t hurt yourself,” Kaizer advised.

“I was exercising before homeroom, so I should be fine!” Butz replied energetically.

The instructor paused. “You should rest a bit, kid.”

Boy, he sure is energetic. Ein couldn’t suppress a smile; he found the situation to be a little humorous. He proceeded to lock eyes with Butz.

“I’ll defeat the Red Bison! If you don’t mind, could you stay and watch for a while, Your Highness?” Butz asked.

“You don’t have to be so polite. We’re in the same grade, after all,” Ein said, though he expected the boy to continue speaking with a formal candor.

Ein had given up his requests for more casual relationships. He felt it was his fate as the crown prince.

“Yeah, for real? Then I think I’ll take you up on that kind offer! Hope we can continue to be good friends!” Butz said, subverting Ein’s expectations.

Just as the prince started to feel he could really get to know Butz, Kaizer told the redhead to enter the glass room. Ein looked on as Butz stepped onto the magic circle and a Red Bison materialized. With the boy in its sights, the bloodthirsty creature charged straight at him.

“H-Hey, Butz! You’re not...” Kaizer said in surprise.

Like Ein had done before, Butz was trying to take the bison’s charge straight on.

“Come on, Red Bison!” Butz yelled. “Raaah!”

It seemed like the child had managed to absorb the force of the bison's charge for a split second, but he couldn't hold his ground and was blown back into the wall. The safety mechanism activated, disabling the hologram.

Butz staggered on his feet, but he looked oddly prideful. "I-I was close!"

"Like hell you were, you dunce! My god!" Kaizer yelled after he briskly approached the boy and confirmed his safety. The sounds of a dull slap bounced around the room as the instructor gave Butz a knock behind the head.

Ein couldn't stop a chuckle from leaving his mouth while he watched the boy rolling on the ground in pain. "He seems blunt, not a two-faced bone in his body," the prince murmured to himself before entering the glass room.

"You looked really cool out there, Butz," Ein said, standing next to the redhead on the ground.

"Oh? Was I? I knew it!" Butz replied. "We see eye to eye, don't we?"

"Eye to eye, my foot! You're both idiots!" Kaizer shouted. "You need to be more serious with your training!"

As Ein's training day came to a close, Kaizer scolded him in spectacular fashion. Afterwards, he cleaned up and left to meet with Chris.

A few days later, Chris accompanied Ein to the café on campus. The mood around the school was tranquil as can be.

"He tries to hide it in your presence, but His Majesty is very worried about you, Sir Ein. I've never seen him in such a panic," Chris remarked. "Ah, do keep that a secret."

"He is? Really?" Ein asked.

"Indeed. He may act dignified, but you're his first grandchild."

I really must've worried him, Ein thought, once again regretting his actions from the other day. *This sandwich is delicious, though.*

Compared to the world-class cuisine he was served at the castle, these sandwiches seemed to be a bit frugal. However, the lettuce was crisp and the meat seasoned to Ein's liking.

“Are you not going to eat, Chris?”

“I already ate at the castle and I’m working.”

“You don’t have to act so reserved.”

“I know you’re kind, but to those who know you as the crown prince, it would be seen as audacious for a guard to be seen eating with you. It would give the appearance that I take you lightly.”

Ein gave a reluctant nod of agreement and turned away as he continued to stuff his cheeks with bites of sandwich. “Some of these assignments seem to be a bit too difficult, don’t they?”

“The Royal Kingsland Academy is Ishtarica’s best. I believe the difficulty is only a natural part of it,” Chris replied, staring at the mess of paper Ein pulled out of his bag. “Why don’t we tackle these assignments one at a time when we return to the castle?”

“Why do I feel like I won’t get much done, even when it’s such a beautiful day?”

“I do have a smidgen of advice for you,” the knight said. Eager to learn a new study method, the prince turned his hopeful gaze to her. “Never stop moving your pen. That’s the shortcut you’re looking for.”

“Right. Yeah, that’s really good advice.” Ein gave another begrudging nod as he flipped through his papers.

Chris laughed. “Well, I’ll be rooting for you.”

As Ein was rummaging through the documents, the handout about the academy district competition caught his eye.

“Speaking of,” he said, taking a sip of his tea, “do you know what kind of event this upcoming competition is? I was told about it on short notice. Since all the academies are participating, I’d probably be part of it too, I’d imagine.”

“You won’t, Sir Ein. Students of the First and Second classes are ineligible to take part in the event, unfortunately.”

“Huh?”

“There’s quite a large skill gap between even students of the same grade, so some rules had to be put in place. Only Royal Kingsland’s Thirds and below are allowed to participate.”

Just like that, Ein was bummed to discover that the event had nothing to do with him. The short notice now made sense to him considering he was an outsider to it all.

“But I do believe Dill will face the swordsmanship contest winner in an exhibition match,” Chris added. “It’ll be on the last day of the event, but I believe you’ll be able to attend and watch the fight.”

“I guess I’ll look forward to that then,” the boy replied.

It was the only thing he could muster any excitement over.

With feelings of dejection, Ein mowed down the last few bites of his sandwich. As he wiped the crumbs away from his mouth, he heard a group of girls chatting away while they made their way to a nearby table.

“Oh,” he said.

“Ah,” one of the girls murmured.

It was Krone, still in her school uniform. The two locked eyes with one another until Ein looked away, unsure of what he should do in this situation. From her pursed lips, one could tell that Krone wasn’t pleased with the prince’s reaction. Krone expected him to say something, but she turned away before Ein had the chance to rectify his foible.

“Uh, Chris?” Ein asked. “Did I do something wrong?”

Chris uncomfortably laughed. “Ah, um, er, perhaps she wanted you to walk over and greet her. The plants dotting the terrace obscure most from looking in, so it wouldn’t be too noticeable if you went to her.”

“I see. You have a point.”

While the boy consulted his knight for advice, Krone’s crew situated themselves at a table just beyond the foliage.

“What shall we order, Lady Krone?” one of her friends asked.

“Ah, let’s see...” Krone started. “I suppose I’ll have...”

A guilty Ein kept replaying the situation over and over again in his mind. *What should I do? What can I do?*

“I don’t think Lady Krone is angry at you,” Chris said.

“I don’t think she is either... But didn’t she look annoyed?” Ein replied. The knight didn’t make a peep in response. “You know, it sure stings when someone silently agrees with me.”

He wasn’t afraid of Krone herself, but was actually spooked by the idea of having his heart toyed with once they returned to the castle.

“Ah yes! This is close to where His Highness swooped in to save me!” one of the girls exclaimed.

“My goodness! There’s been so much chatter around that commotion. He gallantly rushed in and dispatched the outlaws with ease, did he not? Pray, tell!” another girl said.

“I heard that the Vice Captain of the Knights Guard appeared afterwards. The crown prince is so bold,” swooned another.

Overhearing the girls go on and on about it, Ein remembered he wasn’t too far away from the location of his little scuffle.

“Ah, those seem to be the girls from the other day,” Chris remarked.

“That’s quite the coincidence; it must be my lucky day,” Ein replied.

He didn’t want to slink away in fear of Krone’s wrath, but he didn’t want to intrude on their conversation at an inopportune moment.

“That reminds me. Aren’t you rather close to the crown prince, Lady Krone?” a girl asked. “Would you mind telling us a thing or two about him?”

Yeaah, it would be way too awkward if I popped in now. He could clearly picture how Krone would react.

“Well,” she said with a chuckle. She looked down for a brief moment before responding with a big smile. “He’s quite the rascal on occasion. I’d also like to mention that he’s close with the first princess. I see them goofing around in the

courtyard all the time.”

The intrigued gaggle of girls leaned in as Krone continued. As one would expect, Ein was sweating bullets. He thought that Chris might step in, but the knight knew that Krone wasn't one to talk behind the prince's back.

“But most importantly, His Highness is unfathomably kind. Attentive to all around him and more courageous than anyone else I've ever met. I'm truly blessed to be allowed at his side,” Krone finished.



Chris smiled. "What would you like me to do? If you're feeling embarrassed, I can approach them and request they immediately end their conversation."

"I'll be fine," Ein replied. "Besides, that's something I should say myself."

He gulped down the rest of his tea and took a deep breath.

"Do you often speak with His Highness, Lady Krone?" a girl asked.

"I'd like to know as well. What do you two talk about?" asked another.

"Are you perhaps declining invitations because of him?" deduced another.

The rapid-fire barrage of questions had a troubled Krone tilting her head to the side ever so slightly. After a deep breath and a resolution to carefully choose his words, Ein swiftly popped out of the bushes to approach the group.

"I'd appreciate it if you could cut me some slack; it's getting a tad embarrassing," he said. The prince had appeared at Krone's side before she could even begin to answer the first question.

"As you can see, my hands are tied. I suppose I'll speak of this no further," Krone said.

Krone turned her head to him as if to ask, "So this is your apology?" Ein replied with a quick nod. Her mouth contorted into a smile and she followed it up with a cute head tilt. He was met with a split second of suspicion from the table before the girls realized who was looking at them.

"Y-Y-Your Highness?!"

"No way! What brings you—I-I mean, I'd like to truly express my gratitude for saving me from those ruffians!"

"Ah, no need to worry. I didn't do much anyway," he said. It was the most inoffensive reply he could muster while overwhelmed by the instant air of intensity the girls had brought to the conversation. The nervous boy glanced over to Krone, who was cool as a cucumber. "Would you accept an invitation from this lovable rascal, Krone?" he asked as he extended his hand to her.

"Wherever we may be, I shall always accept an invitation from you, Your Highness," she replied.

“Yes, yes, location isn’t a concern because I’m so mischievous and all...”

Worried that Krone had upset the crown prince, the other girls nervously watched on. To their surprise, Krone accepted his outstretched hand and rose to meet him.

“Will you be at the castle today?” he asked.

“I shall. I have a few assignments from Sir Warren to complete,” she replied.

“Perfect timing! Then shall we go home together?”

“Heh heh... Is this your atonement for turning your back on me?”

“Something like that.”

The two clearly displayed an overly familiar bond. As the girls watched on, they were charmed by not only Krone’s casual demeanor around the crown prince, but by how personable the prince seemed to be.

“I’m so sorry to be the first to excuse myself, but I’ll be taking my leave,” Krone said. She bowed farewell to the table of starstruck girls before walking to Ein’s side.

With Chris joining them, the trio started to make their way off campus.

“Lady Krone seemed to be awfully intimate with His Highness...”

“No wonder she’s declined all those invitations.”

The hushed whispers of Krone’s friends could be heard as the trio walked away from the café. The royal family hadn’t publicized the relationship between Ein and Krone, nor did they intend to anytime soon.

“I don’t mind if the two of you act like that around those people, but...” Chris started.

Ein was grateful that his knight had decided to step back while he spoke with the girls. Chris had caught on to the silent joy the lovebirds exuded when they bumped into each other. She couldn’t find it in herself to be too hard on the kids. How could she be when they looked so happy?

“Oh? There’s something peeking out from your bag. Is it an assignment?” Krone asked.

“Yep,” Ein replied. “I was feeling a bit glum because it was so hard, but Chris told me I’d figure it out if I just kept moving my pen!”

“What wonderful advice. That certainly is the right answer.”

Ein frowned a little as Krone glanced at him. She proceeded to grab a few worksheets from his bag and scanned over them.

“This shouldn’t be too hard. I can give you a hand when we get back to the castle,” she said.

“Huh? Y-You know how to solve these, Krone?”

“I’m older than you. Besides, I work hard too, you know?”

“Please be kind to me.”

Ein didn’t want to always be on the receiving end of things, but he decided to take Krone up on her kind offer today. The prince gave a nod of slight frustration while Krone and Chris smiled back at him.

Ein wasn’t the only student trying to leave the academy. Dill had wrapped up his studies for the day and was planning to head to the castle for training with the knights. He was gazing out of the academy’s gate when something suspicious caught his attention.

“What are they up to?” he grumbled to himself, staring at a group of men he’d never seen before. The men brandished a collection of creepy smiles and stared at the boy before they slunk away.

From one look at their clothing and quirks, one could tell that these men were out of place in the academy district. Most of the men were hard to tell apart as they wore fairly standard attire, but one was clad in an extravagant gray robe.

Dill remembered the incident from the other day, causing him to fall silent. *Were those men friends of those ruffians? Revenge seems an unlikely motive.* Dill ran towards the secluded alleyway the men were making their way to. He had his hand on the blade—capable of cutting down an enemy if need be. Given to Dill by his father, the magnificent sword was more than suitable for a member of House Gracier. With his trusty weapon at the ready, Dill rushed

after the men.

“They’re gone? But where?” he muttered.

He soon ran into a dead end after only making a few turns within the alleyway. Dill clicked his tongue in frustration, wondering where the men had disappeared to.

“I must report this to my father.”

Dill knew that something fishy was going down in the academy district. He had a nagging feeling that he was overlooking something important, but he left the back alleys.

Once the boy left, hushed voices could be heard coming from the rooftops.

“Whew, he’s a pain. That kid’s a hassle, not to mention that he’s sharp and fast. Is he gonna be here on the day of?”

“Not at the academy, but he’ll be in the exhibition match. He should be at the arena then.”

“Good. That pesky swordplay instructor won’t be here either. Jeez, I’m glad we can take it easy.”

“Indeed. I’m sure our client will be satisfied.”

Sounding quite pleased with themselves, the men disappeared.

“It seems Marquess Magnus’s household is doing quite well,” Silverd noted.

He was at an important meeting of the aristocratic minds. While focused on administrative duties and the drafting of new laws, other topics were touched upon over the course of the meeting. The king was reviewing revenue and expense reports of numerous houses, with one catching his eye as a severe outlier. Marquess Magnus reported expenses that far exceeded the others.

However, House Magnus had no representatives present at the meeting as the master of the house claimed to have fallen ill. The meeting room was a cacophony, filled with voices of equal parts agreement and confusion.

“Indeed, these expenses are out of the ordinary.”

“It feels rather inappropriate...”

Lloyd raised his voice to silence the others. “I don’t find it to be a major issue. Perhaps they’re repairing their manor? I’m aware that Marquess Magnus’s residence is rather historic.”

“Ah! That might be so.”

“The Graciers are well-acquainted with the Magnuses. If Marshal Gracier deems it so, it must be true.”

With a single peep out of the marshal, everyone in the room had quickly come to an understanding. Trickling down from the king, Warren, Lloyd, and the royal family all carried a fair degree of influence within the castle’s walls. In Ishtarica, that power carried far more importance and authority than one could ever imagine. As such, no one would dare to challenge them.

Warren stroked his beard while mulling over the situation. “Then they should’ve filed a report for that. It’s quite odd that we haven’t received anything of the sort.”

“They must’ve forgotten,” Lloyd replied. “I shall ask them about it in the near future.”

“Is that so? Then I shall await a report from you, Sir Lloyd,” Warren said.

The other aristocrats didn’t dare to interject and quietly listened on.

“If you say so, Lloyd. However, it would be best if we send an inspector over,” Silverd said.

“I understand your apprehension, Your Majesty. Hm...” said Lloyd as a wave of anxiety rushed over him. For a split second, he raised one of his eyebrows.

Warren didn’t fail to notice Lloyd’s subtle gesture and spoke up. “I believe it won’t be an issue. I shall leave this matter to Sir Lloyd.”

Lloyd breathed a small sigh of relief before he quickly let out a loud laugh more befitting his character. “Ha ha ha! I’m sure they just flubbed the documents! I shall reprimand them for their carelessness as well! There’s no need to unnecessarily use personnel!”

“Indeed? I’ll leave this matter in your care, Lloyd. Ah, and it seems our time is

up,” the king said, glancing at Warren.

“That shall adjourn our meeting for today. Thank you for coming,” the chancellor said.

The aristocrats expressed their gratitude in turn and started to leave. Lloyd seemed to be in a rush as he swiftly called out to the pair of authority figures.

“Your Majesty, Sir Warren, I have some urgent matters that I must attend to. I apologize, but please allow me to take my leave as well.”

“I understand. Then I’ll see you tomorrow, Sir Lloyd,” Warren replied.

“Thank you for your hard work,” Silverd said.

“You have my gratitude! Then I shall be off.”

The king stared at Lloyd as he left with the rest of the aristocrats.

“What do you think, Warren?” Silverd asked.

“That behavior was very unlike Sir Lloyd,” replied Warren, stroking his beard pensively—a habit of his when in deep thought. Silverd stayed quiet, waiting for his chancellor’s response. “I’d like to investigate it a little. Would you kindly leave this issue to me?”

“Do as you please.”

“Then I shall look into it to my heart’s content.”

The two gazed outside. The skies were sunny and clear moments ago, but it was now overcast. The gray skyline seemed to reflect the tumultuous thoughts that weighed on their minds.

Chapter Two: The Academy District Competition

The entire district buzzed with excitement and the loud pops of fireworks as it welcomed the last day of the Academy District Competition. It was guaranteed to be a rowdy day, but Ein wasn't as enthusiastic. *It's got nothing to do with me, I guess.*

The boy had his heart set on competing in the sword fighting tournament, but resigned himself to just enjoying the event's festivities. His status as a First wouldn't allow him to do anything else. As they hopped off the train at the district station, Dill looked at Ein with a bit of an apologetic gaze.

"Please excuse me, Your Excellency," Dill said. "I deeply apologize, but I must be off."

"It's fine; I'll be rooting for you," Ein replied.

"Thank you for your kind words."

As the would-be knight was about to walk off, Ein noticed that he was moving more mechanically than ever before.

"Um, are you..." Ein started.

Given that the boys had spent a fair bit of time together, the prince had started to get a feel for the slightest changes in his bodyguard's mannerisms. In Ein's mind, this wasn't Dill's regular "on-the-job" kind of stiffness.

"Is something wrong?" Dill asked.

"Are you nervous about the exhibition match?" the prince asked.

Dill's eyes grew large in surprise; the prince's assumption was spot-on. "H-How did you?!"

"I just sort of had a feeling. You looked a little nervous."

"So you saw right through me... How embarrassing, I didn't intend to reveal my immaturity."

“That’s not true. I’m actually relieved that even *you* can feel anxious.”

“Wh-Whatever do you mean by that?!”

Ein chuckled to himself and didn’t provide a response, making Dill uneasy.

“I’ll tell you if you call me by my name. How about it?” asked Ein, trying to strike a deal. He thought that he’d be successful this time around.

“I-I’ve told you before, but I’m just a humble guard. It would be too disrespectful to you!” Dill said firmly.

“I guess that was a no-go... Fine, I’ll just think of something else.”

“My answer will never change. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Dill returned to his stern demeanor, but his footsteps seemed to be a bit shaky as he walked away. The prince had somewhere to be as well and met up with a pair of ladies who’d been waiting for him.

“Krone! Chris! Sorry to keep you waiting,” he said.

Krone was smiling while Chris appeared to be slightly stupefied.

“A little time by your side and Dill’s changed just like that,” Krone noted.

“I’m surprised to see the boy express any sort of emotion at all,” Chris murmured. Considering that she’d seen him training since he was a little boy, the sight was an incredible surprise for the knight.

Ein beamed with pride. “He still won’t call me by my name though...” He sounded disappointed, but seemed to be cheery as always.

The prince walked ahead with his company following close behind.

“What’s the plan for today?” he asked.

“There’s some time until Dill’s exhibition match, so you’re free to do as you please until then. You may look around and enjoy the festivities,” Chris said.

“I should have asked this earlier, but aren’t you competing, Krone? I thought you’d be in a debate contest or the like.”

“Not interested... Unless... You had a prize for my victory?” Krone teased.

“Uh, I could’ve given you a head pat maybe?”

Ein couldn't think of anything better, but Krone giggled.

"Dear me, then I should've participated. Goodness, why didn't you say so sooner?" she asked.

He tried to put on a tough front but was no match for Krone. Ein felt embarrassed and hastened his pace. "C-Come on! If we don't hurry, we won't have much time to see the festivities! Let's go!"

He mustered all his strength in an attempt to sound calm and collected, but the ladies could only smile and giggle as they tried to hide their chuckling.

While the district would be packed with enthused visitors in town for the competition, the crowd was especially pumped up for the event's final day. The end of the festivities would be marked by a grand event that served as the competition's climax. It even drew guests from high places, with authority figures like Silverd and Lloyd in attendance.

The event attracted the largest crowd of the year, including less than reputable characters. It would be especially difficult to sniff out any suspicious figures. A man clad in a gray robe sat on the edge of a rooftop and let out a groan.

"What a pain... This is Sword with the attack corps. How's the situation?" the man asked.

He was talking into a small magical tool that worked similarly to a walkie-talkie. Once he flipped open the pocketbook-sized tool's front cover, he could dial in a series of numbers and communicate with his comrades. Though those comrades might have come to know him for his occasionally lazy tone and frequent mentions of how troublesome everything was.

The tool was often used by water train crews to report traffic conditions or by castle personnel for short-range communication. As such, it wasn't made available to the general public.

"This is Shield, the control corps. We'll be arriving at our destination shortly."

"Good. This is such a pain, so let's wrap this up so I can go home," the robed

man muttered into the tool.

“Then we should finish this quickly. Our client will pay more in that case.”

“Yeah, that’s good. It’s a pain, but I can’t say I’m not excited.”

The time was...

“Good, it’s time. Do your job so well that I can take it easy.”

“Copy that.”

With a thump, the robed man closed the magical tool, cutting off the transmission. He lethargically lit a cigar and grinned as he gazed upon the Royal Kingsland Academy. Two sharp fangs protruded from his curled upper lip. Once he finished taking a drag from his cigar, he stood up and walked ahead.

Countless stalls lined the city streets. Ein had especially taken a liking to the skewered foods and took in its aromatic fragrance. Together with Krone, he toured the rest of the area and enjoyed their time together. They finally arrived at their last destination, an arena that had drawn a large crowd unlike any other.

“These cheers are intense,” Krone said.

“Yeah, I didn’t expect them to be this loud either... And the arena’s huge too!” Ein exclaimed.

The arena had a number of cylindrical stone columns lined up neatly, forming a large circle. Ein was curious about the arena’s size as it seemed large enough to fit a small castle from a quick glance of the surrounding area. It also appeared to be a bit of a hassle to trudge around the vast clearing that encircled the arena.

“Are there any seats available?” Ein asked.

“Sir Ein, His Majesty will be present for this event. Naturally, there will be seats reserved for the royal family,” Chris replied with a withered look on her face.

“Huh? Right. Of course.”

There were times when Ein still wasn't able to wrap his head around the royal treatment he received. He checked the time and noticed that he still had about an hour to spare until Dill's match. His bodyguard's opponent was likely being selected as he spoke with Chris.

"Once we get Krone settled with my grandfather, could I run back to the academy for a moment?" Ein asked.

"The Royal Kingsland Academy? Is there some business you need to attend to?" Chris asked.

"It's nothing major. I just left something behind and wanted to go grab it."

If he were to be truthful, it was a pain to leave the castle just to retrieve an item from school. Since he was in the area, he wanted to use what little free time he had to go get it.

"I understand. Then I shall go along with you," she said. "Let's drop off Lady Krone first, shall we?"

"Oh Ein, you forgot something on such an important day?" Krone said.

"Sorry, sorry. I'll be back soon, so just sit tight," he replied.

"All right. Come back soon, okay?"

The trio entered the arena and Krone was situated with Silverd and the rest of the royal posse. After that, Ein and his knight took their leave.

The prince power walked down the street; he didn't want to make Krone wait for too long. The Royal Academy was only a few blocks away, so it was about a five-minute walk for the pair. When they arrived at the academy gates, Ein told Chris that he'd "be right back" and rushed inside without her.

"I need to make this quick," Ein said.

He was walking by himself in the hallways. Though the academy didn't have many students to begin with, Ein felt even smaller and lonelier while walking through its halls. His footsteps echoed as he walked in silence.

For whatever reason, he felt that something was different than usual. He couldn't quite put his finger on it and guessed it was either the sound of his footsteps or perhaps something else. *It's definitely the latter. The academy*

feels...off.

“Ah, none of the magical tools are activating,” he mumbled.

The door to each classroom would usually glow, but they didn’t give off the slightest flicker. He couldn’t even hear the birds chirping from outside. Ein felt that it was too quiet. Yes, the academy was certainly empty, but it didn’t warrant this kind of silence. He stopped in his tracks and felt a gust of wind that grazed his ear. A whizzing noise reverberated in Ein’s ear, along with the loud thud of a body falling to the ground.

At around the same time, Loran was stopping by to pick something up as well. While he was standing in the classroom he knew quite well, his fur stood up on end as he trembled with an overwhelming sense of fear.

“Wh-What are you going to do after you capture me?” he stammered.

Like Ein, he’d gone to retrieve something he’d forgotten, but a strange man in a gray robe had immediately restrained him.

“Well, you’re not part of our job, so I’ll free you later.”

“R-Really?!” Loran yipped.

“Yep yep,” the man said in a languid manner. He saw the young boy breathe a sigh of relief and the man gave a crude grin. “Nah, scratch that. This is a work bonus. I can do with you as I like, can’t I?”

“Huh?”

“Do you know what a vampire is? Don’t make me explain...it’s such a pain.”

“I-I-I-I do...”

“I’m a vampire, you see. A rare sight, right? I was in jail until a short while ago, but I was finally able to break free. So you see...” The man took off his hood and revealed his sickly pale skin alongside a pair of two sharp, white fangs. “You’re a werewolf, aren’t you? I’ve never sampled a werewolf’s blood before. May I?”

The man sized Loran up with a smile. He suddenly reached out and grabbed the small boy by his neck.

“Wha— Argh...” Loran barked as he struggled.

“I may? You’re so kind. I’ll warn you, I have a habit of drinking too much, so I might kill you. My apologies in advance.”

“Gh... Th-There’s no way I’ll give you my consent!”

Loran resisted with everything he could. He desperately squirmed out of the man’s grasp and ran towards a window, fully intending to jump through the pane of glass.

“Don’t make me work for this, you furry punk.”

The man easily caught up to the pup after a quick chase. He grabbed Loran’s clothes and threw him to the other side of the room before the young werewolf had the chance to escape.

“I haven’t had any blood for weeks. This is torture, don’t you think? There’s nothing more bothersome and irritating than that. I don’t want you to cause your new friend any more trouble.”

As the man approached him, a flood of tears ran down Loran’s cheeks as did a flood of something else along his pant leg. The vampire was greatly amused by the sight and he let out a menacing cackle.

“I guess I’ll dig in—”

It was all over. Loran had resigned himself to his fate and closed his eyes. However, the loud sounds of wood creaking rang throughout the room.

The door to the classroom was slowly opening.

“Hm, so this is what it sounds like when the door doesn’t open automatically,” a boy noted.

“Huh?” the vampire said. He backed away from Loran and focused his gaze on the child who’d just entered.

“Oh, hey Loran, and, uhhh...dangerous looking guy...”

This child was Ein, who had just determined that the man across from him was extremely dangerous. A pair of strong emotions hit the prince like a freight water train. First, he was enraged to see his friend in danger, and second,

caution; that he should keep his distance from the robed figure. Ein knew on an instinctual level that the man was bad news.

“I believe outsiders aren’t allowed in the building. Who are you?” the prince asked. He posed the question just in case, but was able to predict what was about to happen.

“You... What did you do with the adults who were outside?” the man asked.

“Oh, them? They swung their blades at me, so I tucked them in for a nap. I didn’t think it was prudent to hold back.” Contrary to his calm tone and bravado, Ein was terrified.

The prince had no doubt in his mind that the men outside were small fry compared to the man standing before him. Though a bit of cold sweat ran down the back of his neck, Ein knew he had to do everything he could to feign an air of composure. His life was on the line.

“Huh. A child took out my associates? You shouldn’t lie like that. It’s not a good idea to make an adult mad.”

“You can go out and check if you’d like that. That boy over there is my friend. I’d appreciate it if you would step away from him, but what do you think?”

“And if I say no?”

I knew it, Ein thought. He wanted to know the man’s identity, but Loran’s safety was of utmost priority. Steeling his resolve, Ein unsheathed the jet-black shortsword on his waist.

“Then I’ll have you removed by force!” Ein yelled.

“Huh... You’re pretty quick,” the man said.

The vampire could sense the danger the boy posed and leaped away from Loran before Ein could close the distance. For his part, the young werewolf passed out, perhaps relieved that help had arrived.

“Who *are* you? Why did you come to this academy?” Ein asked.

“Curious? Fine... I guess I’ll tell you my name.”

“Don’t you sound all high and mighty!”

The man threw a large white ball and Ein gasped in surprise. The moment the ball landed on the ground, the prince found himself surrounded by a thick mist.

“I’m a vampire by the name of Freed. Pleased to meet you.”

Freed swiftly kicked the boy in his blind spot. The powerful impact of the blow knocked the wind right out of the prince.

“Ugh... Gah!” Ein gasped.

“I used to be an adventurer, you know,” Freed mused. “I’ve learned to be wary around opponents like you.”

Ein remembered that Kaizer had said something similar in the past. The boy had never experienced this type of combat before. *Loran’s out cold... I may be able to use my skills.* He had made up his mind and brought himself back to his feet with a renewed determination. As Freed stepped back into the mist, Ein poured all of his focus into following the man’s position.

“Then I won’t hold back either,” Ein murmured.

“Hah! Hey now! I didn’t expect a brat like you to say those words, but you shouldn’t get too carried away. Do you want me to tie you up and suck you dry?”

“The mere thought of that is disgusting. I think I’ll decline.”

The boy was back to his usual self. Perhaps as a result of his resolution to use the Dullahan’s power, a wave of reassurance rushed over him and calmed his worried mind. With great composure, he summoned his Phantom Hands—pulsing like a muscle being flexed.

“Don’t be so reserved, I’ll...” Freed’s words trailed off when he noticed what was emerging from the child’s back. “Huh? What’s with those ha—”

Before he could even end his sentence, the black tendrils knocked Freed against the wall.

“Gah!” he gasped.

“It’s not over yet,” Ein said.

The vampire had done something horrible to Loran and was about to do

something even worse to him before Ein stepped in. His rage unsatiated, Ein ordered the Phantom Hands to go straight for the man's gut.

"That's not flesh, that's...hard?!" the boy wondered aloud.

He felt like his tendrils had just tried to punch through an iron shield.

"You see, kid... Adventurers are rather untrusting of others!" Freed yelled.

Freed revealed an iron plate that he'd been hiding underneath his clothing. The scoundrel was well prepared for this dire situation. Ein used one of his tendrils to smash a window and cleared the mist from the room.

"Surrender. You have no chance of winning," Ein said. He was confident in the Dullahan's power.

"Whoa there. Hey now, you want me to return to that dingy, smelly, rotten old prison? You better keep your jokes to a minimum!" In an attempt to escape, Freed lobbed the iron plate at the boy.

"There's no way I'm letting you go!" Ein yelled, using his Phantom Hands to catch the plate and throw it back at Freed.

The prince was a crack shot, and the plate hit the man in the knees and caused him to fall face-first into the floor. Gifted with a nasty concussion for his troubles, the vampire now motionlessly lay on the ground.

"Jeez, what's going on?" Ein said. He approached his friend and shook him awake.

"E-Ein! What happened to the man?!" Loran said.

"I took care of him, so no worries there. Could you tell me what happened though?"

"You did?! Really?!" Loran yipped in surprise. However, Ein was more eager to get a read on the situation.

"Loran, please! Who is he? He seemed to have some friends outside the room too!"

"I-I really don't know! But the vampire man did say that he and his friends were here for a job. I think they captured the professors too!"

Ein was now convinced that they had to move—the academy was too dangerous. He had to get out and report this to Chris.

“You damn brat!” the vampire roared. “Why are you just standing there, you little shit!”

“Ein!” Loran cried.

He’s tougher than I thought. Ein was now regretting that he hadn’t fully incapacitated Freed earlier. The prince leaned over to Loran and covered his eyes.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t see what I’m about to do. Stay as you are,” Ein said.

“Can’t see what? Huh?” Loran yelped.

“I don’t want a sip of your blood! I just want you dead!” Freed bellowed, leaping at the boy from behind.

Without turning to face his attacker, Ein summoned his Phantom Hands once more. He knew that this wasn’t the time to hold back and poured massive amounts of magical power into the creation of two thick tendrils. The appendages rushed straight for Freed without mercy—the vampire didn’t have the time or energy to dodge the brutal attack.

“Ugh... What the... You brat... What a pain...” were the words Freed managed to spit out as the tendrils drove him into the ceiling. After spending a split second as the classroom’s new chandelier, the unconscious man crashed back down and into a desk. He wasn’t going to wake up for a while.

“Huh, I guess I am pretty strong...” Ein said before turning back to Loran. “All right, it’s okay now. Can you stand, Loran?”

“I can, but what was that loud sound?” the pup muttered before he started barking at the state of the room around him. “Wait, huh?! Whaaat?!”

Their classroom was in ruins and the scary man who’d threatened him was draped across a desk. Loran could only guess what happened while his eyes were closed.



“I’m sorry, but I need you to stay quiet for now,” Ein said.

Loran knew this to be a wise decision and quickly put both of his paws over his mouth.

“We should get out of here for the moment. This is something better left to Chris and the others,” Ein said.

His furry friend nodded in agreement before they slowly made their way out of the classroom. The prince let out a quiet sigh of relief as they walked through the door—he only saw the men he’d knocked out on the way in, with no signs of incoming backup.

“Let’s hurry!” Ein said.

“R-Right!” Loran replied.

The two rushed outside. Ein was worried about the captured professors, but knew that he had to ensure Loran’s safety first. A few twists and turns later, they were about to reach an exit when the voices of two men fell within earshot.

“How long until it activates?”

“Ten minutes or so. We’ve gotta rendezvous with Freed before that, or we’ll get wrapped into this mess.”

The men were just around the corner from the boys. Though he was curious about their conversation, Ein was more concerned with where the men stood—they were right in front of the exit. The boy knew there was no way that he and Loran could leave unnoticed.

“Hide, Loran. Stay hidden and don’t show your face, all right?” Ein whispered.

“I know... I’m sorry for being so useless,” Loran replied.

“That’s not true at all. I’ll be going now.” Ein appeared alone in front of the two men with purposefully loud footsteps. “Hey, what were you two talking about? Could you tell me more?”

His tussle with Freed had left Ein much more composed than he expected to be. The nervous thumping of his heart died down, allowing him to stare the

men down with an eerily peaceful smile. The pair of thugs stared right back.

“How did you get here?!”

“If you’re looking for Freed, I already knocked him out. So what’s the deal with this countdown you were talking about?” Ein replied.

“I don’t get what’s going on here, but...” one of the thugs said.

“You’re just a pip-squeak! You’ll listen after you’re socked one!” the other added.

These dolts clearly had no idea who they were messing with. Ein quickly noticed that these guys weren’t the sharpest tools in the shed, especially when compared to Freed. He wanted to end this quickly and summoned his Phantom Hands once more. The spooked goons tried to run off, but they weren’t fast enough.

“Escape from my grasp if you can,” Ein said.

Like a snake subduing its prey, the tendrils wrapped themselves around the thugs and squeezed tightly. The grotesque sounds of the men’s creaking armor echoed in the air.

“Who are you? If I don’t get an answer, I’ll only squeeze tighter,” Ein threatened.

“W-We’re just hired men! Ex-adventurers!” one thug gasped.

“H-Hey! Don’t spill the beans. Gah!” the other groaned.

At least one of them was willing to spit out the answers Ein was looking for.

“What’s your purpose? Why are you at this academy?” Ein asked.

“I-I don’t know! W-We were just hired by an aristocrat... O-Owww!” the first thug whined.

“They said that they had a grudge against this school! Seriously, that’s all I know! They put this thing by some café with a ton of magic stones too!” the other responded.

With answers provided, the men pleaded to be released, but Ein couldn’t resist the temptation to squeeze them even harder. He ended up squeezing the

pair until they fell unconscious. *I've done it now*, Ein thought. He surely had more questions to ask.

“Who harbors a grudge against this academy?” Ein wondered aloud. After he deeply thought it over for a moment or two, a specific name came to his mind.

However, he swiftly remembered how the men spoke of a ten-minute countdown. The pair had mentioned they would be wrapped up in the mess if they didn't flee, greatly implying that the contraption was quite dangerous. *But what can I do?*

If it was an explosive, Ein had neither the knowledge nor skill to defuse it. However, it didn't sit well with him to turn tail and run with the knowledge of such a dangerous weapon nearby.

“What can I do...”

Just as he was about to give up, the boy was hit by a wave of exhaustion accompanied by an irresistible urge to consume. He'd felt this before. It was a strange phenomenon that ignored his wishes and drew his body towards the nearest magic stone. This time, he felt himself drawn in a specific direction.

“A presence of a magic stone? N-No way, there's no way I could detect something like that.”

Contrary to his own words, he could do just that. Ein had unconsciously absorbed the powers of stones before, so it wasn't a stretch to assume he could sense nearby stones as well. Especially when one considered the wide magnitude of power that resided within him. Thinking back to the man's words, there was only one nearby café that Ein could think of, and its terrace provided a secluded location to plant the device. He didn't know this for sure, but his gut told him to take a gamble on this hunch.

“So the dangerous weapon could've used magic stones as its source!” The prince remembered the time when a magical tool had gone berserk in one of his aunt's offices. “If those are high-quality stones, they could create a huge explosion...capable of taking out the academy and the whole district with it.”

Before one of the men fell unconscious, he'd mentioned a tidbit about the magic stone. If the explosive and the magic stones were prepared separately,

the scale of the explosion would be massive.

“I need to do what I can... If I don’t... I’m sure *he* would’ve done something!” As Ein realized he didn’t have time to spare, thoughts of the man he greatly admired came to mind—thoughts of the first king. “I’m sure the first king would act in this situation.”

The prince was certain that his hero wouldn’t flee; the man had slain the Demon Lord after all. Though running away would be the right course of action for the crown prince, the first king surely wouldn’t. Ein’s heart wasn’t going to let him just turn tail.

“Loran! Come here quickly!” Ein called out in haste.

If the ten-minute countdown was real, he only had about nine minutes left. Loran rushed towards him and the prince put his hands on the werewolf’s shoulders.

“Listen carefully. Go outside and tell Chris to go to the terrace café on campus,” the prince said.

“Huh? But what about you, Ein?” Loran asked.

“Please listen. Tell her about the ruckus in the academy too. I’m sure she’ll notify the nearby knights immediately. Now, hurry and go!”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, but you want me to find that blonde lady that picks you up every day, right? Wait for me; I’ll let her know right away!” Loran sensed the urgency in Ein’s voice and ran as fast as he could for the exit.

“Am I being selfish?” Ein asked himself.

His sense of justice might not be leading him to the right answer. He had responsibilities as the crown prince and was about to do something nothing short of foolish, but Ein shook his head of these concerns.

“I don’t have time,” he said. “The professors are captured and only *I* can do this.”

What would the first king have done in the same situation? *He’d surely face it head-on. He beat the Demon Lord, so this wouldn’t be much of a challenge for*

him.

“Okay, that might be too grand of an excuse.”

The prince had simply followed in the first king’s footsteps, taking action like his idol surely would have. The rather convenient excuse lit a passionate fire within Ein’s heart.

Like the rest of the academy’s campus, the café was disconcertingly quiet. A man was sitting in a corner of the eatery that overlooked the nearby lake.

“There’s no saving this academy,” the man murmured sadly as Ein approached him. “It’s been crammed full of worthless peasants, blurring the line between gutter trash and the aristocracy. It’s even caused a noble such as yourself to fall from grace. That’s the pigsty this academy has become.”

From a passing glance, anyone could tell that the pompous man was an aristocrat. With his opulent attire and his fingers adorned with bejeweled rings, it was clear that the man loved to be the center of attention. However, Ein wasn’t a fan of such gaudy fashion.

“The academy is wrong. Why must mere commoners stand alongside *us*, those who have noble blood flowing within our veins? I’ve done nothing wrong. I’ve only worked to correct those who’ve had their minds corrupted by such insensible ideals.” His manner of speaking was charming and attracted the attention of others. “You can indubitably see why I may have a less than charitable view of the royal lineage. How I may disapprove of this corruption of the current king and his reign at the hands of common slop.”

He sounded calm despite the ominous flair carried by his words. The man was easy on the eyes, but the insistence of his righteousness irked Ein.

“Wouldn’t you agree, Your Highness? A man of your caliber can surely change the future of Ishtarica,” the man said.

“I like Ishtarica as it is, so I can’t agree with you...Wolf Magnus,” Ein said.

The two had never met, but Ein was sure that Wolf was behind the attack on the academy. The man stared back with wide eyes—the prince’s deduction was

correct.

“So you know of me,” Wolf said. “I don’t believe I’ve ever had the honor of interacting with you.”

“I just guessed correctly, is all,” the prince replied.

“As I’d thought. You’re quite the man, Your Highness. If you’d spare me some of your precious time, I’d be more than happy to explain my ideology.”

“No way. The entire area will be up in smoke by then, right?”

Wolf’s eyebrows jolted upwards in shock. The aristocrat had been babbling for far too long—Ein needed to end this quickly. He clicked his tongue in irritation.

“What’s the trap and where did you set it?” Ein asked.

“Did you meet Freed? Ah, but if you’re here, that must mean—”

“I already defeated him. You’re the only one left.”

Wolf paused. “I find that hard to believe. I thought Kaizer was the only man here who could best him.”

“You’re probably right. That’s why you chose today, a day when Instructor Kaizer was out, didn’t you?”

Wolf gave a mocking smile. “Which means you’re quite strong, Your Highness. Freed has defeated numerous adventurers in the past and yet, you’ve outpaced him...” He slowly backed away from Ein, ensuring an escape route.

“And I heard that he escaped from prison quite recently.”

“But of course. He had my aid, after all.”

Ein’s alert mind quickly thought back. *Dill told me that Wolf was given a cushy job in charge of the knights’ schedules.* A knight under Wolf’s influence was likely put on guard the day of Freed’s escape.

“This plan was rather tiring to put together. I had to purchase a few new magical tools and it cost me quite a bit of coin. I won’t let you get in my way,” Wolf said.

“Huh, so you’re telling me that the entire household of Marquess Magnus was

in on this plan?”

“You jest. Our noble, pure-blooded household is already tainted. This is all my doing.”

The execution of his meticulously planned scheme to ensnare the academy was a testament to his oft-praised intelligence. It was no wonder he’d once been an instructor there.

“I even took extra precautions to keep anyone related to House Magnus from getting in my way,” Wolf boasted.

“You know a thing or two about the toxins secreted by monsters, right? Did someone fall ill after you poisoned them perhaps?”

“Hm, I wonder? The household’s chef was thrown into prison...”

“So he was your scapegoat. You’re a real piece of work.”

Now that the prince knew the truth, he’d had enough. Ein clenched his fists so hard that his nails dug into his palms. “You’re wrong and I’m going to stop you.”

He unsheathed his jet-black shortsword. Wolf suddenly became enraged upon hearing that he was in the wrong.

“Oh, I do wish for your forgiveness. I still have so much to do!” he snarled.

In a pathetic show of cowardice, the man tossed a spherical magical tool from his chest pocket. It was a simple tool that would explode upon making contact, but a direct hit would be serious. Ein dodged the item and took a deep breath, hoping to end the battle quickly. Realizing that he couldn’t escape, Wolf launched a barrage of attacks.

“I’ll show everyone who *truly* is worthless! I’ll prove it to my father, brother, and the academy’s board of directors! And finally, I must indoctrinate Gracier’s eldest son to his core!” Wolf yelled. His grudge was squarely aimed at Dill’s reports, those involved with his dismissal, and Silverd, who gave the final approval.

Wolf seemed calm and intelligent, but his prideful personality was apparent. Not even an ounce of loyalty to the royal family remained within him. His current actions only served to feed his self-esteem.

“Don’t be stupid. You’re the one in the wrong!” Ein said, looking defeated.

The man’s crooked worldview had led him to commit these vile acts—acts that couldn’t be ignored.

“Today will be the birth of a new Ishtarica! I will lead the noble blood to—” Wolf started.

“That day will never come,” Ein said, cutting him off. “Enough. I don’t want to hear any more of your babbling.”

Unlike Freed, Wolf wasn’t accustomed to combat and Ein was easily able to close the gap without any resistance.

“I guess I’ll ask you again. What’s the trap and where did you set it?” Ein asked.

“Hm? Whatever are you talking about? Why would I ever tell—”

As Ein had expected, Wolf didn’t talk. In a last-ditch effort to display his arrogance, Magnus remained cool as ever. With a dry smile on his face, Ein spun his blade around.

“What—” Wolf tried to speak, but the prince had rammed the hilt of his blade into the man’s belt buckle. The intensity of the impact had Wolf’s eyes rolling back into his skull as he fell to the ground. With that, the battle was over in mere moments.

“I need to hurry and find that mechanism,” Ein mumbled.

He looked around, but found nothing of use. He could sense the magic stone nearby, but not its exact location.

“But where...” Ein murmured as anxiety started to creep up on him. He only had a few minutes left. “Hey! Where did you set your trap?!”

His eyes darted around his surroundings in a panic. He glanced between the trees, on the treetops, and within the building, but couldn’t find a single clue. Thinking that it was all over, he looked at the ground. *That must be...* Without a hint of doubt in his mind, he crouched down and narrowed his eyes.

“I found it!”

The mechanism was in an unexpected location: within the small lake nearby. The lake's clear waters allowed him to see the bottom, but some aquatic foliage obscured his view. He caught a glimpse of a peculiar item. *How do I stop it? How can I absorb the stone?* He only took a moment to think before his body moved. He threw his jacket aside and dived into the water with gusto. *I'm glad I found it.*

Even though this was the first time he'd gone swimming since his reincarnation, Ein's diligent training allowed him to swim with ease. *That tool looks similar to the one that went off in Aunt Katima's office, but the furnace looks bigger.* Connected to a black monolith, this furnace of sorts was reminiscent of a woodstove. A bright flare of light leaked from the tool and Ein extended his hand towards the furnace.

I'll end this here and now! He used everything he could to absorb the energy from the magic stones within the device. Ein slowly felt himself being satiated by his meal, confirming his hunch that the tool was filled with high-quality stones to ensure a big boom. The buffet of clashing flavors ran amok on his palate, causing Ein to smack his lips in disgust. Several seconds later, he'd finished absorbing the explosive full-course stone meal and the lights from the device had died away. The prince had confirmed that it was no longer a threat.

"Bwah!" he said, gasping for air. He'd rushed into the lake and hadn't taken a deep breath before diving in. He swam for shore and climbed up onto the ground.

"I-It's over. I don't really get what happened. I truly don't, but it's over..." he huffed. He'd used up all his energy and was sprawled on the ground like a starfish.

A few seconds later, his trusty knight sped to his side.

"S-Sir Ein! Are you all right?!" Chris asked.

"Yeah... I'm just a little tired," Ein replied.

She cradled Ein in her arms and raised his upper body. Loran had been successful in his call for help.

"I'm sorry. I know you want to scold me, but please rescue the professors

first,” Ein said.

“The knights are already on their way! They’ll regain control of the area in seconds!” Chris replied.

“Ah, thank goodness. Then my efforts were all worth it.”

“I’d love to give you a good scolding, but you acted like a hero. Can you stand?”

“Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

It was all over, but an uncomfortable feeling nagged at Ein’s chest. He felt that assuming the matter was settled would be a grave mistake. He silently stood back up with Chris’s assistance. Though he glanced at the unconscious Wolf Magnus, Ein was still uneasy.

“This was supposed to be his revenge, but he only targeted the academy. I can’t imagine a man of his sharpness allowing things to end so easily,” Ein muttered.

“S-Sir Ein? Is something the matter?”

“Not really, but there’s something off... Something’s not sitting right with me. Wolf was attempting to take revenge on Dill, my grandfather, and those involved with his dismissal. Yet, he seemed content to only target the academy.”

Wolf’s words echoed in Ein’s mind. *Today will be the birth of a new Ishtarica! I will lead the noble blood to—* To accomplish his plan, the most effective play would be to...

“Chris! This isn’t over yet!” Ein yelled. He picked up his jacket and ran ahead. His epiphany explained his sense of discomfort.

“Sir Ein?!”

The prince rushed outside the academy with Chris following closely behind. While they were dashing outside, Ein let Chris in on Wolf’s true goal.

“S-So you’re saying another magical tool has been set somewhere else?!” the knight asked.

“Yes! The magical tool he set was meant for the academy! However, he actually wanted to strike back at everyone that kicked him out! If so...”

If so, his real target was within the district’s currently packed arena. If the king, the Graciers, and others of great influence were snuffed out, it might truly give birth to a “new” Ishtarica as Wolf had claimed. Ein ignored Chris’s words of caution and desperately ran for the arena.

“Everyone’s in danger!” he yelled.

A few seconds after Ein started running for the arena, Dill’s exhibition match had finally gotten underway. Unfortunately, Dill wasn’t quite his usual self.

“Ugh,” he grunted.

“What’s wrong? Why do you swing your sword so weakly?!” his opponent bellowed.

Dill had remained on the defensive the entire time. Lloyd couldn’t hide his anxiety or his irritation at this unexpected sight.

“Dill, what are you doing?” Lloyd muttered from the stands.

Sitting next to the aggrieved marshal, Silverd had a similar opinion. “Hm, I’ve heard that his opponent is a childhood friend, but surely he wouldn’t have that much trouble.”

“I-I agree, Your Majesty. If he displays his usual skill, Dill wouldn’t break a sweat against a swordsman of his age, even the academy’s strongest. He’s trained with the castle’s knights and has been under my personal tutelage as well.”

Dill was in some kind of daze, restlessly glancing around the arena whenever he could. Krone offered her opinion to Warren, who sat nearby her.

“Sir Warren, could it be that Dill is acting odd because Ein isn’t here?” she asked.

“What do you mean by that?” the chancellor replied.

“He said he’d be back soon, but that was quite a while ago. Perhaps Dill is

worried that something may have happened to Ein.”

“Now that you mention it, he *has* been glancing our way.”

With the prince nowhere to be found, his young bodyguard must have felt something was amiss. Several moments later, Dill’s childhood friend landed a blow on the marshal’s son and scored a point.

“If so, Dill may be slowly opening up to Sir Ein,” Warren guessed.

This was a good sign, making it all the more vital for Ein to be present.

Your worried bodyguard is here, Krone thought to herself.

Outside the arena, Ein had arrived and was searching for the second device. He could feel the presence of magic stones as he had before, but there was nothing he could do without finding its source.

“No Sir Ein! We must evacuate immediately!” Chris said.

“I can’t! We don’t have much time!” Ein cried.

“But!”

Ein hurriedly searched around the arena while staying one step ahead of his knight. He had a good handful of reasons as to why he couldn’t back down.

“No buts! If the worst were to happen... My grandfather, Lloyd, and the others aren’t the only ones that would be hurt! Even Krone will... Krone might...”

His face quickly shifted into a gravely serious expression, complemented by a gaze that naturally compelled others to obey his orders. The last time he exerted this much pressure was during his speech at the castle party. Chris’s panic turned to silence as she felt the prince’s intensity reverberating into the aether.

“I’m the only one who can absorb the power of the magic stones. If the stones can’t be removed from the device, we’ll have no other way to deal with it!” the prince yelled.

There was no arguing with his sound logic, though Chris bit her lip in

frustration.

“I understand. Then I shall risk my life alongside you,” she said.

It was all she could do as a knight. If Silverd wasn't at the arena, Chris might have dragged Ein away from taking on such a dangerous mission. There was no doubt that the knight had gone through a myriad of conflicting emotions before she came to a conclusion.

“I've once again been reminded that you must not be left alone, Sir Ein,” she said.

“You're not praising me, are you?”

“Of course not. If someone isn't by your side, I'm worried about what you may do. Lady Olivia was a mischievous child, but it seems to me that you're even more of a troublemaker.”

“Th-That's not true. Mother brokered an international trade deal all by herself...”

“Lady Olivia actually avoids dangerous situations, but you seem to dive into them head first. Even if it puts your own well-being at risk.”

Unable to talk back, Ein pursed his lips and pouted.

Chris laughed. “I can't say this too loudly, but I think you're very brave, Sir Ein.” It was her duty to keep the prince's behavior in check and said duty made it uncomfortable for her to admit how she really felt. “You're not simply Lady Olivia's child. You're *you*, Sir Ein.”

Though it was a bit out of place given the tense situation, Chris serenely smiled at the prince with kind eyes. Ein wasn't one to run from danger, especially if the lives of his loved ones were on the line. Those brave words and actions had led the knight to see the young boy as incredibly valiant.

“Did Wolf say anything else, Sir Ein?” she asked.

“He said he wanted to destroy the current king's reign, or something of the sort.”

“The king's reign... That's it! That might be the answer!” Chris had found a ray of hope bursting out from within the boy's words. “Near the back entrance of

the arena is a bronze statue of the first king! Perhaps Wolf had harbored a grudge against him as well.”

“Th-That could be it!”

Ein hastened his pace and with every step he took, he could feel the magic stone’s energy growing stronger. The boy’s senses had confirmed Chris’s hunch and the pair glanced back at each other for a split second. The arena’s back entrance was once the main doorway into the building. However, with the further development of the academy district’s infrastructure and the introduction of water train stations, a new entryway became the face of the arena. The original entrance was far more grand and extravagant in comparison, making it a perfect home for the five-meter-tall bronze statue of the nation’s beloved ruler.

“Chris! Look!” Ein said as he looked directly under the first king. He was thankful for the knight’s keen advice.

I’m surprised no one else noticed that something was off, Ein thought, staring at an identical copy of the contraption he saw not long ago. It was so blatantly out in the open that no one had bothered to bat an eye. As the exhibition match was reaching its climax, only a handful of people were even wandering around the back entrance. Light started to spill out from the black monolith attached to the device.

“I won’t make it in ti—”

“Not yet! I have my powers too!” Chris shouted, cutting the prince off. Taking advantage of her expertise in wind magic, the knight blew a gust of wind at the boy as he ran to the device.

“Thanks, Chris!” The gust surrounded Ein and sent him speeding towards the statue.



The light emanating from the monolith started to blink rapidly as the device loudly creaked, signaling that an explosion was imminent.

“This is the end, Wolf!” Ein yelled, putting his hand over the device.

He absorbed the magical energy at a rapid pace. A loud, heartbeat-like thump ran through Ein’s body as the light slowly died down. In a matter of seconds, the magic stones within the contraption turned transparent.

“Sir Ein!” Chris shouted.

“I’m fine,” the prince replied.

It’s over...for real, this time. Ein was overcome with a sense of accomplishment as today’s incident had finally drawn to a close. The boy was exhausted from all the running around and liberal use of his powers. He borrowed Chris’s help to stand up and gazed at the sky before he loudly exhaled.

Raucous cheers echoed throughout the arena—an upset was unfolding in front of the crowd’s eyes. The audience was well aware of Dill’s title as the district’s strongest swordsman, but the tables had been turned against him.

“Where is His Excellency? Has something happened? Father and His Majesty are here, but...” Dill mumbled to himself, noticing that Chris was nowhere to be found as well. He was becoming increasingly worried that something was up.

“Where are you looking?!” his opponent roared.

“Ugh!”

Dill couldn’t get his mind into the battle. He mocked himself with a snide smile, perhaps a recognition of his immaturity and lack of mental fortitude. He hadn’t spent much time with Ein, but the prince had left quite the positive impression on the would-be knight. Dill kept cursing his own weakness while worry plagued his mind.

“I’ll win! I’ll win against you and be known as the strongest in the academy district!” his friend screamed.

Dill was overpowered by his opponent's aggressive attacks. *Crap*, he thought as his foe's sword approached him. He'd already lost a point and losing another would result in his defeat.

Amongst the loud cheering, a single boy's voice rang through the crowd.
"Win, Dill!"

The boy had only uttered two short words. Dill turned towards the voice and saw Ein standing in a passageway to the stands.

"Y-Your Excellency?" Dill murmured.

Even from afar, he could tell that Ein wasn't looking too hot. The messy-haired prince was caked in dirt from head to toe. He sure didn't look like a crown prince in his current state, but Dill was more relieved to know that Ein was safe and nearby. The clashing of metal could be heard as the two competitors crossed blades.

"I'm sorry, but I shall be victorious here," Dill proclaimed.

"Wh-What?! How did you suddenly..." his opponent stammered.

"I apologize for being so unsightly. From here on, I shall show you how I truly wield my sword."

Dill's skills were elegant. Ein was enchanted by the graceful movements of Dill's blade. His sword glided through the air to parry his foe's blade before Dill staggered his opponent and knocked him to the ground. The crowd paused for a brief moment before erupting into applause, showering the boy with praise.

"Huh? I-I didn't know Dill was that strong," Ein said.

"It's only natural. It seemed like he was struggling until now, but that was just because he's duty bound to protect you. I wouldn't expect him to lose to another student," Chris replied.

"Huh, I see..."

"I'm not quite sure if the guarded should be stronger than the guard, but I guess it can't be helped. You defy explanation, Sir Ein."

She stared at the dirt-covered Ein and took a handkerchief from her pocket. She proceeded to wipe the prince's face, but the ticklish young boy started

shaking about.

Chris chuckled and gave the prince a squinty-eyed smile. "You've done well today."

Wolf and his coconspirators were all arrested. The lot would eventually pay dearly for their crimes, but that was a story for another day. In the week following the competition, the castle was still bustling with activity. As things started to die down, Lloyd and Warren entered Silverd's room.

"Well then, Lloyd. The person who tried to get in contact with you was..." the king started.

"I've already shared this information with Sir Warren. I didn't think things would go this smoothly, so I'm still in disbelief. Ha ha ha!" Lloyd said.

"Indeed, that was some poor acting on your part. Anyone who would believe you is a fool," Warren added.

The three were referring to the meeting they held the other day. Lloyd had impulsively protected Marquess Magnus's household, but it was all an act. He thought of the plan on the spot and tried to probe for any accomplices.

"Two newly appointed barons had cooperated with Wolf. I understand that lower-ranked aristocrats would be willing to side with the marquess but..."

As Lloyd had stated, he'd found two aristocratic families that supported Wolf's plan. Warren was secretly ecstatic to hear the marshal's findings, relieved that they were able to pull some weeds out of their garden.

"Wolf was the cause of the house's high expenditures and widespread illness. It's such a disappointment that I'm at a loss for words," Silverd said before moving on to the topic of his grandson. "Ein's actions were courageous, but I worry for him as his grandfather."

Under normal circumstances, he would've reprimanded the crown prince for being so reckless. However, Silverd couldn't find it in himself to scold the boy in this case. Wolf had taken advantage of the lax security and used his new position to set his plan in motion. The boy had to be praised for his deeds

before he was told off for his foolishness.

“Then perhaps you should tell Sir Ein how worried you were, Your Majesty. However, I recommend you tell him as his grandfather and not as the king,” Warren advised.

“Ah! That’s a splendid idea!” Lloyd agreed.

“Indeed. I may not be able to admonish him as the king, but I can fret over him as his grandfather,” Silverd said.

Ein had been involved in a truly dangerous conspiracy—a coup d’état that had put him in grave danger.

“Speaking of, I did ask Ein if he wanted a reward,” the king mentioned. The two other men looked on with interest. “He requested to be allowed to walk around town, even if it meant having a bodyguard by his side. It gave me a chuckle to grant his request.”

“That’s quite a reserved request,” Warren noted.

“But it’s par for the course with Sir Ein. I’m sure that’s why Dill’s attitude has started to slowly change,” Lloyd said.

“He’s only brought good results for us. And would you know where the crown prince is, Your Majesty?”

The king was in high spirits amidst the peaceful mood. “My grandson should be at the beach around back.”

After returning to his normal routine the day before, Ein was enjoying himself on the beach’s white sands. Once she was informed of the incident, Olivia wrapped her son in a big hug and refused to let him return to his room. He’d also worried Krone, and though she was grateful for his display of bravery, the girl clung to him. Several hectic days later, Ein was finally able to take some time for himself in the sand.

“Oh? I wonder what this is,” Krone said as she picked up an object from the ground and showed it to Ein.

“It’s beautiful, but I don’t know what it is either. It’s not a rock,” Ein said.

The object was some sort of translucent fragment with a bluish-white tint.

Curious, Krone went over to Olivia to show the princess what she'd found.

"Lady Olivia, would you know what this is?" Krone asked.

"Hm? Did you pick something up?" Olivia asked as she took the item into her hands. "Where did you find this?"

"Over there, on the beach."

Olivia's expression turned grim for a brief moment before she returned to her usual demeanor as though nothing were wrong. "I'm sure it's just the scale of a sea monster that washed ashore. Isn't that right, Chris?" The princess remained calm and gave a serene smile, dispelling any sense of uneasiness.

Chris approached the ladies and took the item into her hands. Her eyebrows soared and she stammered, "I-Indeed. I believe so... Lady Krone, I'd like to look into this matter, so may I keep this?"

"Certainly. It would be rather dangerous if it was a monster," Krone replied.

"Thank you. Now, if you'll excuse me."

From an outsider's perspective, the meandering conversation seemed trivial. Krone returned to Ein's side on the sands and played together. However, Chris and Olivia exchanged glances before the knight discreetly slunk into the castle with the fragment in hand.

Chapter Three: Winter in Ishtarica and a Birthday

The year was starting to wind down—November quickly passed by and Wolf’s attempted coup d’état was a thing of the past. Ein had recently made a new friend and they talked often, despite the boy almost throwing himself at the prince’s feet during their first encounter. With a smile on his face, Ein watched his breath dance in the cold air as he thought back to that day.

“Ah, you seem to be in a good mood today, Your Highness,” his new friend said. The boy’s name was Leonardo and he was the eldest son of the high-ranking Duke Pholus. On first impression, he seemed to be just as robotic as Dill, but was far easier to talk to and joke around with. The boy’s golden-brown hair was neatly arranged.

Leonardo was fully aware of the crown prince’s existence before entering the academy. He was actually the son of the aristocrat who had accosted Krone during last year’s party at the castle. That night was still fresh in the boy’s mind. Despite being the same age, Ein had won Leonardo’s admiration—he’d never seen anyone display that much courage and dignity in person before that evening. The Pholus household’s eldest son was instantly enchanted by the commanding aura the prince had demonstrated in front of the adults. Leonardo had actually thrown himself to the prince’s feet to apologize. Once all was forgiven, Ein ended up spending quite a bit of time with Leonardo.

“Yeah, I just remembered something funny,” the prince said nonchalantly. He reached for the teacup sitting on the table in front of him. With the weather changing, it was a little too chilly to relax at the terrace café on campus. “It seems that Warren called Duke Pholus to the castle. Did something happen?”

“Ah, there’s been a spot of trouble with Agustos Trading Firm. A good number of large and influential companies have been trying to stir the pot. Given that my family has ties to those companies, we were asked if we had any news,” Leonardo replied.

“I see. So they were gathering information.”

“Something like that, yes. The Agustos Trading Firm is currently flourishing, so there’s no shortage of people who envy them. This is just my personal opinion, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they became the Royal Capital’s most powerful firm in the next couple of years.”

The firm’s chairman was Graff August, the former patriarch of Heim’s influential August household. The trade expertise he had developed in Heim was greatly effective in Ishtarica, with his skill highly praised by the chancellor. Warren had once even said that “Sir Graff was born in the wrong country.”

“It hasn’t been a year since the company was established and they’re taking the trading industry by storm. Who would have guessed? On that topic, aren’t you quite familiar with the firm’s chairman, Your Highness?”

“We have some history,” Ein replied.

“Ah, I noticed you were quite friendly with his granddaughter,” Leonardo said uneasily, remembering the disrespect his father had shown Krone.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about, but yes, I’m familiar with Krone.”

Leonardo gave a dry laugh. For generations, House Pholus had produced the sort of authoritative figures who would go on to take posts within the Legal Affairs Bureau. Leonardo’s education had sent him well on his way down this path, but one could tell he was actually easygoing after a quick chat.

“Sorry to keep you waiting! I brought you all something— Huh? What were you guys talking about?” Loran said, wagging his tail from side to side as he approached his peers.

“Nothing much. We were just chatting,” Ein said.

“I see,” the werewolf said energetically as he looked back at his pair of smiling friends.

The trio enjoyed a light snack before they headed for their classroom.

After Luke entered the classroom and confirmed that his full ten-student-class of Firsts were in attendance, he proceeded to scrawl something on the chalkboard. *We don’t have homeroom often; makes me curious what he’ll*

announce today, Ein thought. He looked to his left and saw that Loran was just as confused. The instructor finished writing and turned to his students.

“Read what’s on the board,” Luke said. “This will be the first academy event you will be allowed to participate in.”

Two words were written in large letters on the board: FIELD TRIP. It was an event for younger students and Ein felt himself smiling in excitement.

“You guys might be misunderstanding something,” the instructor said. “Our academy’s field trip differs from that of other schools. You’re required to scrounge for your own food while collecting resources and watching out for monsters.”

Huh?

“You’ll only be allowed to bring certain items. No food, no drinks, no magical tools, no fancy weapons. Basically, anything that’ll make your life easy. Any questions?”

What the hell? Questions are all I have. Ein couldn’t stop himself from cursing, but had stopped himself from vocalizing his thoughts. His peers seemed to be on the same wavelength as they leaned forward with befuddled expressions plastered on their faces.

“I’d expect no less from you all. I’m proud to know that you’re an excellent lot,” Luke said. He seemed to gravely misunderstand his student’s reactions.

The students weren’t silent due to the details of the trip—that they understood—but they needed time to fully process what they’d just heard.

“We’ll meet up with the Seconds, making it a total of thirty students,” Luke said. “You should all be divided up into groups of four, but some of you might end up with the deadweight of a fifth. Additionally, you’ll be accompanied by an upperclassman guard from the First or Second class for extra protection. Ein, please keep in mind that Dill will be with your group.”

“Yes, sir,” Ein said.

This wasn’t a surprise as Dill was already Ein’s bodyguard. After giving a sluggish reply, Ein glanced to his side and saw Butz fast asleep on the desk.

Butz's sleeping face seemed to be so happy as he slept the day away; perhaps he was under the assumption that he wouldn't get in trouble. The boy's steady breathing could be heard from across the room.

"What a cheeky kid," Ein mumbled.

"What was that, Ein? Did you say something?" Luke asked.

"Nothing, sir."

Ein was tempted to slam the table and abruptly wake Butz from his peaceful slumber, but Loran flashed a forced smile at the prince.

"That's all for today's homeroom. You can attend class, do research, or do whatever you'd like. Details of the field trip will be mailed to your homes at a later date," Luke finished.

Ein felt his face grow tense as he stared at Luke leaving the classroom just as calmly as he'd entered.

A few minutes later, the students were off to do their own activities.

"It's in groups of four, but don't we have three already? Me, you, and Leonardo!" Loran said to the prince. The field trip had more than a few concerning strings attached, but the young werewolf pup was peppy as always.

Leonardo approached the pair. "I overheard you guys talking and I'm all for it. That is, if you don't mind, Your Highness."

"I don't mind at all. I can't think of anybody else anyways," Ein replied. He'd be more at ease if he was around his friends and it also would make for a fun trip.

"I don't know anyone else, but can either of you think of a fourth?" Loran asked.

"Neither can I, unfortunately," Leonardo said. "This academy doesn't have many students, so it's a bit of an issue. Would you have any leads, Your Highness?"

Wait, do I only have two friends? Ein felt a twinge of pain in his chest as he stared pensively outside the window. *Wait, I've got one more.* He shifted his gaze towards a boy who was in the midst of his carefree nap.

“I might know of someone else,” Ein said as he slowly rose from his seat. With his pair of friends in tow, Ein walked towards the kid in the middle of a nap. “Butz, can I bother you for a bit?”

“Hm? Oh, hey Ein. What’s up?” asked a bleary-eyed Butz. He rubbed his sleepy eyes and groaned as he stretched his back.

“If you don’t mind, would you like to join our group?” Ein had forgotten to state what this was in regards to, but the boy was quick to catch on.

“Sure. You’re talking about the field trip, yeah?”

“Huh? So you knew. Were you listening in your sleep?”

“Nah, I knew that this academy has these field trips.”

“Ah, so that’s why...” Ein trailed off, understanding why Butz was able to sleep through homeroom.

“Hey now, don’t give me a weak sauce response like that. I’m not stupid, you know! I’m not always sleeping in class.”

Ein didn’t mean to question Butz’s intelligence, but he did think back to the time when the redhead tried to tango with a Red Bison hologram.

“Hey Leonardo. You remember my grades and standing following the entrance exam, don’t you?” Butz asked.

“I do. You were third in our grade,” Leonardo replied.

Both children of aristocratic families, Leonardo and Butz were familiar with each other. The prince and the little wolf were the most shocked to hear how highly Butz had marked.

“I-I was fourth,” Loran whimpered.

“Nice! Ein was first and Leonardo was second... So if our grade’s top four students are clumped together, it’ll be easy peasy ripple squeezezy,” Butz said before turning to the werewolf. “Loran, you don’t have to worry about me being an aristocrat or anything like that.”

It seemed the two had never spoken before, but Butz displayed his frank and friendly personality.

“Your Highness, this boy wasn’t accepted to this academy on the sharpness of his sword, but the merits of his mind,” Leonardo added.

“That’s amazing. So you really *are* smart,” Ein said.

“Mhm. Well, I prefer swinging my sword though!” Butz replied as he shyly smiled before crossing his arms behind his neck. “And our guard’s probably gonna be the Gracier’s son, right? He’s probably experienced since he’s your bodyguard, so I think this field trip’s gonna be easier than I imagined.”

The group had more than enough combat prowess and knowledge. Luke had mentioned that the field trip was different from that of other academies, but Ein was feeling relaxed now. *Hey, it might not be too much of a struggle after all.*

The prince was confident in his reliable band of buddies, and furthermore, he felt safe.

Just as Luke had said, each student’s household received a message containing the field trip’s full details. Since Silverd was the head of the academy’s board of directors, he’d simply fill Ein in on the minutia of the excursion.

On one of his days off from school, Ein had wrapped up his training for the day and made for the showers. After cleaning up, the prince walked through the castle’s halls until he bumped into Warren. The chancellor praised the boy for his hard work before offering up a suggestion.

“Why don’t you go out for a breath of fresh air?”

“A breath of fresh air...” Ein said, pondering over the chancellor’s suggestion. “Hm... I could go play on the beach out back again, but that wouldn’t be much fun.”

“Then why don’t you go outside the castle walls? Didn’t His Majesty grant you permission to wander outside following the Magnus incident?”

“That’s right... The castle town sounds like it could be fun.”

“Very good. Then perhaps you can invite Lady Krone to join in your little

excursion.”

Warren flashed a warm smile before he made his leave. Things were moving quickly, but Ein was so excited to go into town that he hadn’t noticed. He walked around the castle while humming a jolly tune.

“I wonder where Krone is? Maybe I should ask Martha,” Ein said.

“Certainly. I know where she is,” a voice suddenly said.

How did she— The prince was slack-jawed as Martha had suddenly appeared before him. His body jerked in surprise as the servant looked at him, her gaze implying that she’d only made an appearance because she was called.

“Lady Krone is currently in Lady Olivia’s room,” Martha said.

There was a long pause before Ein could collect himself and reply. “Thank you. Then I’ll be off.”

“Of course. If you’ll excuse me.”

Martha sent him off with an elegant bow of her head, but the lady’s abrupt and unexpected appearance was now stuck in the back of Ein’s mind. The prince did his best to cast his surprise aside as he walked around the corner and to his mother’s room.

He approached the door and gave it a few gentle knocks. Upon hearing his mother’s voice from inside, he entered the room.

“Sir Ein?” Chris said.

Ein entered the room to find a most unusual sight: the knight had joined Olivia and Krone on his mother’s sofa. When the trio looked up from the coffee table, Ein had the feeling he might have stopped by at a bad time.

“Huh? Were you guys chatting about something?” the boy asked his mother.

“Welcome, Ein. Well you see, Chris was—”

“W-W-We weren’t talking about anything!” the knight hastily cut in. “I just, uh...wanted to enjoy some tea with my um...favorite ladies!”

“Mother?” Ein asked.

Olivia giggled. “I guess that’s that. I’m sorry.”

It had become quite apparent that the trio wanted to keep their conversation out of Ein's earshot. *Well, ladies have their secrets.* He was fully aware that most people had things they wanted to keep to themselves—secrets to be kept even from the crown prince. Ein decided he wasn't going to push the topic and shifted his gaze to Krone.

"Good day, Ein," she said.

"Hi Krone. Martha sent me this way actually. I hope my appearance wasn't too much of an imposition," Ein said.

"You're fine. Sir Warren visited us mere moments before you came by."

"He did?" *Is that why he encouraged me to invite Krone?* "W-Well, in any case...um, Warren suggested I go out on the town for a breath of fresh air. Would you like to come with me?"

"Oh my. Are you asking me out on a date?"

"I suppose it's all up to phrasing," he said. Ein was indeed blushing, but didn't deny Krone's bold claim.

"Goodness, I'd be much happier if you were more honest..." Krone said. Though her words had a little bite, the smile on Krone's face made Ein glad that he'd invited her. "Ah, would you like to join us, Lady Olivia?"

"I'm sorry," the second princess apologized. "I have some business to attend to. Chris, would you mind tagging along with them?"

It was only natural that the knight would go with them as a bodyguard, but Olivia's way of speaking seemed to imply something more. Noticing that Krone had seemingly caught on, Chris cracked a hopeful grin.

What's going on? Ein wasn't able to hide his bewilderment, but Krone and Chris were already preparing to go out on the town before he could even respond.

The Royal Capital's crescent-shaped port sported a series of gorgeous and well-maintained facilities—a home to ships owned privately and by the military. While on the way to the port, the trio decided to go on a little shopping trip

before heading back to the castle. The chilly ocean breeze grazed their cheeks.

“It’s so cold,” Ein muttered.

“It’s December, Ein. You should’ve dressed for colder weather. Don’t you have a scarf?” Krone asked.

“Huh... I don’t think I have one. Hmm... I might want one of those.”

“Hm, I see. A scarf,” Chris murmured as she scribbled on a piece of paper she’d been keeping in her pocket.

Ein was confused by the knight’s frantic scribbling, but he shifted his gaze to the ocean. “It’s pretty rocky around here.”

He noticed a couple of boulders slightly peeking out of the water. Those very rocks were the reason the Royal Capital’s port couldn’t hold a candle to the one at Magna.

“Are you referring to the rocks over there? Well, shortly after the royal capital was founded, a monster went on a rampage. Those boulders are some of the leftover debris,” Chris explained.

“A-A monster?” Ein asked.

The boy couldn’t even begin to imagine how devastating the incident was. If those rocks were only scant traces of the damage done, it stood to reason that the whole area was once land. Even Krone could only quietly listen on in awe.

“The land is gouged out in a crescent-like shape, but it wasn’t that way when the country was founded. Ishtarica had more land than we can see today. In fact, much of the old port is nothing but ocean now,” the knight said.

“Dame Chris, that implies that a wide swath of the country was destroyed by the monster,” Krone said.

“Precisely, Lady Krone. As you’ve stated, a single monster wiped that land off the map.” Chris slowly walked along the pier. “The beast’s massive frame dwarfs our battleships and its power over the seas can swallow the land whole. It is often referred to as the ‘king of the ocean,’ but we know it as the Sea Dragon.”

Ein couldn’t believe it. It’s not that he didn’t trust Chris’s story, but the royal

capital's port was no small thing to sneeze at—even with Magna outclassing all others. The boy gulped at the thought of a creature that could potentially wipe away the entire country in one fell swoop.

“I’ve heard that entire fleets of warships and innumerable lives were lost to the monster. The path of destruction left by that beast is only second to that of the Demon Lord,” the knight finished.

“Has it already been subdued?” Krone hesitantly asked.

An uneasy smile had appeared on Chris’s face. “It has been, but the Sea Dragon reemerges once every one to two hundred years. It wouldn’t be untimely if it appeared in the near future.”

Historically, the Sea Dragon had decimated the country every time it appeared. Chris mentioned that everyone must be prepared to make a sacrifice if they hoped to defeat it once again.

“But hasn’t Ishtarica made many technological advancements since then? Surely there’s a plan to stop it,” Ein said.

“As you’ve said, we’ve continued to research methods to combat the Sea Dragon, but even so,” Chris said, her ponytail wavering slightly. “The experts are unsure how many lives we may lose this time around.” As the knight had said, the Sea Dragon was a destructive threat on the level of Demon Lord.

“I-I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t mean to put a damper on our outing,” the knight stammered.

“Not at all. Right, Krone?” Ein said, turning to the girl.

“That’s right. Thank you for informing us of something so important.”

The trio left the docks in hopes of lightening the mood, but Ein walked away with a newly instilled, instinctual fear of the Sea Dragon’s existence.

With the days becoming shorter and streetlights growing dim, it wasn’t long before the first signs of snowfall would appear. The prince and the lovely ladies accompanying him were walking down a street adjacent to the castle town’s main road. Both sides of the street were packed with luxury stores that catered to the nearby aristocratic community. Even Majorica’s establishment was just a

stone's throw away.

With a rather tense expression on his face, Ein had walked out of a tailor's shop. "Is it all right for me to buy that many clothes?" The garments they'd purchased would be delivered to the castle, so there was no need for the prince's entourage to worry about shopping bags.

"Of course it is. The queen herself had requested that I help you refresh your wardrobe. You've had quite the growth spurt as of late anyway," Chris said.

"You looked good in them. Would you wear them for me next time?" Krone asked.

"Th-Thank you, but I'm just worried about the price," Ein stammered. The total price had more zeroes attached than he'd expected.

"You're the crown prince, Sir Ein. It would be a problem if you were a frugal dresser," Chris said.

Unlike Ein, Krone didn't bat an eye over the transaction. Born into the household of the grand duke, she was well-acquainted with seeing massive amounts of money move before her eyes.

"It's not good to spend excessively; it's a total waste actually. However, if the royal family and nobility were to be overly stingy, money wouldn't properly flow through the country's economy, would it?" Krone said.

She firmly informed Ein that there were certain matters in which one must spare no expense. Standing next to the pair, Chris quietly nodded in agreement.

"E-Enough about me! Is there anywhere the two of you would like to go?" he asked. He understood what Krone was saying, but it didn't keep him from feeling guilty. They'd visited a fair number of stores, but the boy felt even more guilty that he was the only one who'd bought anything.

"Well... Dame Chris, is it all right with you?" Krone asked, glancing at the knight.

Chris gave a gasp of realization and replied, "I suppose so."

"Ein, there's a store I'd like to visit. May I request your permission?"

"Of course," the prince replied. "Let's go."

The two kids were walking so close to each other that their hands were almost touching. Chris felt a little impatient as she watched over the lovebirds, but she knew that their relationship had definitely improved.

“Over here. Come now, follow me,” Krone said. She was apparently familiar with the streets around the area.

“O-Okay, okay!” Ein squealed. The boy looked so embarrassed when Krone grabbed his hand to drag him along. The very hand she pulled at him with was adorned with the glittering and glistening star crystal. “What store are we going to?”

“Hmmm... It sells hair ties, rings, and shoes for gentlemen.”

“It doesn’t seem like a general goods store. Is it more of an accessory shop?”

“Something like that, yes.” Just as Ein thought that he could have some fun, Krone rained on his parade. “When we enter the store, there’s something I’d like to take a look at with Dame Chris. You might be by yourself for a little bit, is that all right?”

Ah, I see. I get it. Ein guessed that it was an item that could only be discussed amongst ladies. The prince understood what Krone was directly implying—she wasn’t acting suspiciously, but seemed to be genuinely ashamed for making the request.

“Sure. I’ll just be walking around the store. I hope that’s not a problem, Chris?” Ein said.

“O-Of course! We won’t be far away, but you must stay in the store. Is that clear?” Chris replied.

The academy incident was still fresh in the knight’s mind. She made sure that Ein wouldn’t run off on his own, but the prince didn’t intend to in the first place.

“I know. I’ll be wandering around the store, so please find me when you’re done,” he said.

The trio approached a wooden building that seemed to be cozy as a cottage. Thanks to the soft orange glow of the nearby street lanterns, this store and its surroundings had a rustic but elegant personality.

“Huh...” Ein muttered.

Luckily enough for the prince’s entourage, the two-floor store had no other customers at the time of their visit. One would quickly notice the store’s many displays of intricately designed pens and tie pins. A sign noted that shoes, hats, and other accessories were sold on the second floor.

“Do you have business on the second floor, Krone?” Ein asked.

“That’s right. Would you like to come with us, Ein?”

“Hm, that’s all right. I’ll stay on the first floor, so you can take Chris up with you.”

“Thank you.” She saw straight through his considerate words and gently smiled at him.

The ladies left the prince’s side and ascended the stairs. The clacking of their shoes echoed throughout the store as they made their way up to the second floor.

“I’ll just look around,” Ein said.

He walked around the store excitedly as he’d never been allowed to be off on his own. He gazed at the neatly lined showcases and occasionally voiced his interest. The middle-aged owner of the store approached Ein.

“Sir, is there anything I could assist you with to—” The gentleman quickly shut his mouth and changed his demeanor upon noticing that the boy was the crown prince. “My my... I’m terribly sorry for calling out to you. You have my deepest apologies, Your Highness.”

“U-Ummm, you have no reason to be sorry at all. I’d greatly appreciate it if you weren’t so formal with me. I’m actually surprised that you know who I am,” Ein replied.

Not many at the academy knew his true identity, so it was a bit shocking for Ein to be recognized from a passing glance.

“Whatever are you saying? You’ve already had your announcement of princehood, Your Highness. I’ve had the honor of serving Her Royal Majesty within my humble store. She’s told me much about you on her visits.”

“My grandmother has visited this store? No wonder it’s so refined...”

“You’re too kind.”

Ein proceeded to walk around the store with the owner by his side. Despite the establishment’s small footprint, the gentleman and his wife had been running the place for quite a while. The owner mentioned that even the king had been by the store a time or two. Ein was starting to understand why Krone was fond of this store.

“However, I’m afraid that nothing we have in stock can rival that young lady’s jewel,” the owner remarked.

“Are you referring to the star crystal?”

“I am indeed. As far as I’m aware, a jewel like that hasn’t been sold anywhere within the Royal Capital. I have a feeling that you gifted it to her, Your Highness.”

Yet again, the owner had Ein figured out. Though the gentleman didn’t push the topic further, Ein did find himself nervously smiling. It was a delicate subject for the prince, so he was thankful that the owner had demonstrated great restraint.

“Could I have your help with finding a gift? I owe a lot to those two, so I thought about getting them something,” Ein said.

“I see,” the owner said. He was deep in thought for a few moments before offering a suggestion. “I believe it would be unwise to present the young lady with any jewelry. Nothing can rival the one she carries with her.”

“Then how about something that would come in handy this winter?”

“Perfect, though I do think a simple necklace would be a fitting gift for your knight.”

Ein nodded at the man’s advice and started searching for gifts within his budget. For Krone, he ended up finding a large and elegant shawl. Similarly elegant was the necklace he found for Chris—a chain adorned with a bejeweled coin. He also made sure not to leave his mother out of the gift-giving and nabbed a little something for her as well. Each of his purchases was embossed

or embroidered with a seal, ensuring the quality of the items.

Several minutes after the trio had parted ways, footsteps could be heard descending the staircase.

“Ah, it seems the ladies have returned,” the owner remarked.

Krone and Chris emerged from the stairs, carrying a small paper bag. *I wonder if they found what they were looking for.* The two ladies looked at each other with a satisfied smile.

“It seems to be time for you to take your leave. If the occasion arises again, I would be honored if you allowed us to assist you,” the owner said, bowing his head.

“Thank you. I shall rely on you if we ever have the chance,” Krone replied, expressing her gratitude to the man as Ein approached her. “I’m sorry for making you wait for so long, Ein...”

“I’d like to say the same. I apologize,” Chris added.

“Don’t worry at all. It’s fine. I had my fair share of fun too,” the prince replied.

After exiting the store, the trio walked back to the castle as the curtain of night slowly fell on the city’s streets. Upon his return home, one could quickly notice that going out for a breath of fresh air had done wonders for the boy’s mood. Ein smiled from ear to ear as he enjoyed his supper.

Two weeks later and it was already the middle of December. Everyone in the castle was scrambling to prepare for an upcoming party—one that Silverd was more hands-on with than any other that year. From the castle’s windows, one could see the falling snow slowly morphing the sights of the city into an enchanting nighttime vista. Only the royals, a handful of servants, and a few knights would be invited to attend this party.

“Happy eighth birthday, Ein,” Olivia said with glee. She was sitting next to Ein, who was set up in a special birthday seat.

A birthday party for the boy wasn’t hosted last year as Ein hadn’t yet announced his princehood. For this party, only a select few guests were invited

as a result of the Magnus incident. However, the event was being hosted in a room far too grand and far too luxurious for a simple celebration.

“Here’s your present, Ein,” Olivia said before handing her son a small box with a ribbon tied around it.

“Thank you, mother! Can I open it?” Ein asked.

She smiled and encouraged her son to open the box. “What do you think? I’d be happy if you like it.”

Inside the box was a single pen engraved with the royal family’s seal. There was no doubt that the pen was expensive, but Ein was over the moon to see his family’s seal emblazoned upon it.

“Thank you for such a wonderful gift! I’ll be sure to treasure it!” the boy gushed with jubilation.

“Heh heh. I’m glad to hear that. Happy birthday, Ein.”

The prince received another big hug from his mother before he closed the box and placed it on the table in front of him.

“Goodness, I had no idea that child didn’t do well under pressure,” Olivia murmured.

“Mother? What child are you referring to?”

“The cute yet clumsy and adorable elf who always watches over you. I’m talking about that klutz.”

“H-Huh? Is something the matter with Chris?”

Olivia looked at her son while cracking a worried smile, but Ein was still confused. *Speaking of, I haven’t seen her since the party started.* At first, the prince thought that Chris had other matters to attend to. However, he wondered just how much work she really had with so few guests in attendance. It had him quite curious as to why he hadn’t caught a glimpse of his knight.

“She must be doing her best to muster her courage,” Olivia said.

“Uh, I don’t really understand what’s going on, but I’ll go greet the other guests,” Ein said.

“Of course. I’ll see you later.”

Ein stood up and surveyed the room. He’d already received gifts from his guests, including Lloyd and Warren, but the prince hadn’t personally thanked them yet. He laid eyes on the Graciers and decided to speak with them first.

“All right,” Ein said as he took a glass in hand and approached the Graciers’ table. “Good evening, Lloyd, Dill. Thank you for coming to my birthday party this evening.”

“Ah, Sir Ein! What a joyous occasion this is! Happy birthday!” Lloyd bellowed.

“Happy eighth birthday, Your Excellency,” Dill said in a lower voice. “We’ve sent you a gift from our house, but please don’t hesitate to let us know if there’s anything else you desire. I’ll take care to provide you with an additional gift.”

Dill was as stiff as ever, but he wouldn’t have been this talkative in the past.

Ein took his chance. “Then can you call me by my na—”

“Though your gift would have to be anything but referring to you by your name, Your Excellency.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve felt this impatient.”

Lloyd couldn’t suppress his snickers. “N-Now, Sir Ein, I apologize for Dill...”

Ein knew why the marshal was chuckling; the boy must’ve had a goofy expression on his face.

Dill sighed. “Your Excellency, we’ve gone over this many times.”

“Th-Then I think it’s about time you gave up!” Ein said.

“I mustn’t. I’m but a humble bodyguard.”

“But you call Lloyd and the others by their names.”

“I’m a bodyguard apprentice. Since I’m a student and still have much maturing to do, I shall address my father and others differently.”

He always has an excuse for everything! Ein thought, expressing his discontent to himself. He could only furrow his brows at Dill’s sound logic. The prince was still determined to have his guard refer to him by name one day.

“F-Fine, I’ll let you off the hook for today, but next time...” Ein started.

“Sir Ein, it sounds like you’re just fleeing...”

“I’m just declaring our next match! I’ll win next time! I’m sure of it!”

The prince conveyed his gratitude and his adamant desire to be called by his name before leaving the table. He then walked over to Warren, who was sitting next to Krone. She was in the middle of a pleasant chat.

“Ah, Sir Ein,” the chancellor said.

“Good evening, Warren. I wanted to thank you for the gift,” the prince said.

“It’s not much at all. Your party this evening has truly been lovely, but I must apologize for having to take my leave right as you’ve come to visit. I have something to discuss with His Majesty. Please excuse me.”

After a quick greeting, Warren stood up and left. The lovebirds stared at each other and chuckled.

“Heh heh, it seems he’s being considerate of us,” the girl said.

“I guess so. I feel a little bad,” the prince replied.

“But since he’s graciously left us alone, I suppose I’ll take advantage of this opportunity.” She took the boy’s hand and placed a small box in his palm.

“Happy Birthday, Ein. I think this might be the first gift I’ve ever given you.”

“Th-Thank you! May I open it?”

“Of course. Go ahead.” She tilted her head to one side in an adorable fashion.

Ein was dying to know what was inside. Krone glanced at the prince and bent down, peering into the boy’s face.

“This is...” Ein gasped.

Inside was a silver bracelet. It was a thin but simply designed accessory crafted by linking a series of small chains together—a splendid gift indeed.

“Will you wear it?” Krone asked.

“Of course! I’m so happy! Thank you!” Ein exclaimed.

“Thank goodness... I’ve always worn the jewel you gave me, but it didn’t sit

well with me that I hadn't given *you* something to wear," the girl mumbled.

On her right hand was the glittering star crystal, reflecting the light from the chandelier. She was elated to know that they were now wearing each other's gifts.

"But when did you have time to prepare this?" Ein asked as he tried to put the bracelet on. He wasn't used to wearing jewelry and was having a hard time trying to fit it. Its clasp clacked about as he tried to snap it shut using only one hand.

"Come over here; I'll give you a hand with the clasp," Krone said.

"Sorry..."

"You don't have to worry. I bought this when we were out and about the other day. Remember the last store we stopped by? I did leave you alone for a good while."

"I didn't notice at all."

"Heh heh, then it seems like my secret purchase was all worth it."

Like Krone, Ein's right hand was also decorated with an accessory. The pair of kids smiled as they showed off their jewelry.

"Goodness, even His Majesty is in high spirits," Krone said.

Warren had made his way to the king's table. Silverd's cheeks were a rosy red thanks to the ample amounts of booze he'd been drinking. He was laughing heartily as he cheerfully spoke with the chancellor. Sitting at the king's side, Queen Lalalua was starting to become a little tired of her husband's drunken antics.

"Ha ha ha! Very well! I'm in a good mood right now!" His words conveyed how much lenience he'd shown the boy.

"Whoa, his face is a mess," Ein murmured.

"You *should* say that he has an impressive smile," Krone replied.

"He doesn't seem like a king right now— Wait, how could he look so dignified while being so drunk?"

“He’s the king of Ishtarica. It’s not too odd, is it? I’m sure he’s using the occasion to express himself as a proud grandfather.”

“You could be right. He’s a wonderful grandfather.”

The two kids clinked their glasses together. They were only drinking juice, but Krone was able to make anything look classy.

“Were you able to meet with Dame Chris?” she asked.

“No. I haven’t seen her since the party started. Do you have an idea where she is?”

“If you ask a woman such as myself, I’d say her quirks have always been adorable.”

“Huh?”

Ein was puzzled, but Krone left him hanging.

“Nothing,” she said as she placed her glass on the table.



“Dame Chris might be waiting for just the right moment,” she said.

“Huh? What? Will I be attacked or something?”

“Nothing of the sort. She’s just trying to time things out.”

Befuddled, Ein tilted his head to one side.

“Why don’t you try heading to the balcony? Dame Chris might show up if you wait there for a while,” Krone suggested.

“I-Is that a prediction or woman’s intuition?”

“Don’t you worry. My instincts are usually correct in these situations.”

Upon seeing Krone’s confident and firm response, Ein was convinced—she was good at doing that.

“Then I guess I’ll go on over,” he said.

“Please do. I’m sure she’ll find you.”

Ein left Krone’s side and headed for the balcony. He couldn’t stay outside for long as it was quite chilly with all the snowfall.

“I don’t get it,” he mumbled, repeating Krone’s words of reassurance in his head. He failed to understand what she meant.

A short while later...

“A-Ah, fancy meeting you here, Sir Ein!” Chris said, approaching the boy. She seemed to be restless and had both hands unnaturally folded behind her back.

“You really came,” Ein muttered, astonished that Krone was right. He stared blankly at the knight, as though she had been dragged outside by some unknown force. “I haven’t seen you all day, Chris. Where were you?”

“M-Me? Uh, ummm... Right! I was assisting Martha! There were some odd jobs I had to take care of...”

“No, you weren’t. Martha’s been at the party as a guest.”

“R-Really?”

“No, not really. I told a fib, but I now know that you did too. Ugh, it’s so cold out here...”

Chris faltered for a moment after realizing she'd been tricked, but her face glimmered with a sliver of hope thanks to Ein's seemingly innocuous statement. She proceeded to waltz towards the boy.

"W-Well, of course it is if you walk out dressed like that. Y-You see, I just happen to have something to help with that. You may have it if you'd like!" Chris said as she wrapped a soft piece of cloth around Ein's neck.

A strange warmth came off the garment, but it warmed the prince nonetheless.

"Huh? Is this a scarf?" Ein asked.

"P-Precisely! It was a stroke of luck that I had it with me!"

"I see... Huh?"

Ein noticed a seal on the end of the scarf. It was from the store they'd visited the other day. *Did Chris...*

He understood why Chris had been acting so suspiciously. The knight was so unaccustomed to giving gifts that she was too embarrassed to even approach him today. Krone's words were finally starting to make sense.

"Well, I did say that I wanted a scarf while we were at the pier," Ein said.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Whatever are you talking about?"

"I have a present for you as well, Chris. Thank you for such a wonderful birthday gift and for always looking after me." Ein took a small box from his pocket—one similar to the box that he received from Krone. "I actually purchased a few items myself. I have one for my mother and Krone too, but I thought I'd give this to you first. Here you go."

Ein forced the box into Chris's hesitant hands. "Could you open it?" he asked.

"It's so pretty... I-I mean... I can't accept this!"

"I'm always causing you trouble, so I'm just trying to express my gratitude. Also, I've heard it's quite rude to refuse a gift from the crown prince."

His mischievous smile implied that he wasn't actually going to exert his power over Chris. He just needed to be a little assertive in order for the knight to

accept his gift.

“Th-That’s not fair! How could I refuse if you say that?!” she cried.

“This scarf is quite warm, Chris. Did the second floor of that store have a good selection?”

“Huh? Y-Yes. They have quite a few scarves with a similar design... Ack!”

“You don’t have to act like you’ve been found out. I already know. I’ll be wearing this to school by the way.”

Ein had the upper hand and Chris was unable to hide her panic when he’d figured out her play. However, she was overjoyed to know that the crown prince enjoyed her gift. She was so happy, she could have danced a little jig.

“Hm,” she pouted. She wanted to refute it, but felt her cheeks grow hot.

“Um, I don’t think you have to be embarrassed...”

“But I am! I’m a lonely woman who’s never really given a gift before. I’ve been trying to find the right time to do this... I’ve been a nervous wreck, okay?!”

“You don’t have to be so defiant...”

“Fine! I’ll be wearing your gift as well!”

“Please do. I’d love it if you do.”

Chris was dumbfounded by the prince’s innocent smile. She’d finally calmed herself down after vocalizing her thoughts.

“A-Ahem. Well then, allow me to congratulate you once more, Sir Ein,” she gallantly said. “Happy birthday.”

“Thank you very much. You’re still blushing a bit though.”

“J-Just ignore it!”

Ein had seen another side of his stalwart knight on his birthday. The knight, in turn, learned once again that while the prince was kind, he was quite the troublemaker on occasion.

Chapter Four: The Royal Kingsland Academy's Field Trip

While walking through a dark and damp forest, Ein found himself thinking back to the morning's events. *After arriving at the academy, I took another train back to White Rose before hopping on the boat that brought me here. Is this really a "field trip?"* He let out a little laugh to himself.

Butz yawned. "I'm so sleepy... Hey, Loran. How long will it take to walk to our destination from the cape we just passed?"

"It'll take a while," Loran replied. "It's a three-day journey, so I honestly don't want to think about the distance."

"I'll stop asking then. What a long field trip!"

Ein firmly nodded in agreement as he listened in on their conversation. After arriving at an island on Ishtarican waters, they were ordered to make their way to a peninsula on the other side of the rock. The students had three days to reach their destination, with the threats of roaming monsters and starvation looming over their heads.

"Hey, Ein," Butz said listlessly.

"Hm? What's up?" the prince replied.

"Isn't it dark out here? Don't you think something might pop out?"

"Not might; they will."

The roars of beasts echoed throughout the dimly lit forest, with that dim lighting giving off an unsettling glow.

"Butz, as His Highness has said, monsters *will* come out," Leonardo added.

"Yeah, I guess so. We've already defeated a few slimes along the way," Butz said.

"You're right. Although, Leonardo and I are just staying safe on the back line,"

Loran said.

The monsters on this route could be defeated by students. The teachers would never dare to send students into a place swarming with dangerous monsters, especially if the crown prince was one of those students.

“But both of you should remain vigilant. Is that clear?” Dill warned.

He was present as per the field trip’s regulations. One student from the eldest class would act as a bodyguard for the group should anything happen. Since he was already duty bound to protect Ein, Dill had been tasked with looking over the party.

“I’ll do my best to not cause any trouble... Fighting isn’t a strong suit of mine,” Loran said.

“You’re silly, Loran. There’s nothing to worry about; this isn’t a very dangerous island anyways,” Butz said to reassure his furry friend.

Just as the redhead had said, the monsters of this area didn’t require assistance from the back line. Upon seeing the skies grow dark, Leonardo offered a suggestion.

“Should we start a fire? I’d like to recommend that we start setting up camp.”

“Agreed. The rabbit we’ve caught on the way here should suffice for food, but we need to find some water,” Butz said.

“We should be fine as long as the water isn’t too dirty. This magical tool that I made can purify it,” Loran said, his ears twitching from side to side.

“Loran, I don’t believe you were allowed to bring any magical tools,” Dill said.

With their abundant wealth, aristocrats would automatically gain the upper hand if they were allowed to bring magical tools with them. Their use would make the trip considerably easier.

“I don’t think it’s a problem, Dill. I’ll be using the magical stones from the monsters we defeat on our journey. It’s easy to use those in crafting a small water purifier,” Loran replied.

“I-I see. Then that’s not an issue.”

Loran's words were strange coming out of the mouth of an average child, but they demonstrated just how technically adept he was.

"Your Highness, I can create a simple barrier with my skill. I'm confident we can avoid the attention of nearby monsters," Leonardo said.

Leonardo was more of the studious type, but his rare skill—Barrier—provided a safety net for the group. He hadn't fully refined his use of the skill, but it would do the trick.

Ein and Butz stood at the front, while the other party members provided excellent support as masters of their own crafts. The party made their way through the forest in this formation for the first few hours of the trip before starting to set up camp for the night.

"Look guys, I found something good," Butz exclaimed.

Everyone's attention was focused on the item in his hand.

"What is that? It's got a weird color," Ein said. His cheek twitched at this newfound fruit.

"It may not look great, but it's a fruit, Your Highness. It doesn't taste half bad either. However, Butz, this fruit looks very similar to a poisonous one. Are you able to tell the difference? I haven't the faintest clue," Leonardo said.

"Nope. I brought it over thinking you might've known," Butz replied.

Butz's assumption was wrong and he glanced over to Ein.

"Do you know the difference, Dill?" Ein asked.

"I do, but rules state that I mustn't offer advice," Dill apologetically replied.

The prince smiled as he'd been noticing Dill change little by little—the bodyguard even expressed slightly more emotion. *Now what should I do... It'd be bad news if that fruit really is poisonous*, Ein thought to himself before coming to a realization.

"Butz, can I see that fruit for a moment?" Ein asked.

"S-Sure, but be careful."

"I know. Hmmm... It's softer than I expected."

The fruit was about as large as a child's head. Ein sniffed the fruit, intrigued by its tangy and sweet scent. However, its purple skin was rather unappetizing. *I should've done this from the beginning.* He secretly used his Absorb and Toxin Decomposition EX skills in unison, but nothing happened. With that in mind, he deemed the fruit safe to eat.

"This is edible; it's not poisonous," Ein said.

"Huh? You can tell?" Loran asked.

"I'm just lucky that I happened to read a book about it."

"Whatever the case, isn't this a good thing, Leonardo? We have more to eat for dinner," Butz said.

"Only because His Highness was able to discern it," Leonardo replied.

The group sat on a log and rested for a bit. Once the light started to fade from the forest canopy, their surroundings grew dark at an astonishing speed. It might've been better if they'd set up camp earlier, but Ein made sure to keep that in mind for next time.

"Relaxing like this makes me feel like we're on a vacation," Butz said.

"Yep, I agree," Loran said.

The cool breeze blew through the forest, causing the rustling of the leaves to reverberate throughout the air. The flames of the campfire danced in the wind and blessed the camp with a unique atmosphere. The rabbit's meat cooking beside the fire had the boys' mouths watering. Sitting down alongside the fire gave the group a chance to relax and tend to their weary legs. They'd been walking all day.

"Hey, Leonardo. Is it true that you got yourself a fiancée?" Butz asked.

"Wh-Why're you asking that so suddenly? Don't be weird about it!" Leonardo replied.

"Huh?! I haven't heard a thing about that!" Loran said.

"Calm down, Loran!" Leonardo replied.

Given that Leonardo was from a famous aristocratic family, it wasn't unusual

for someone of his age to be already engaged. No one knew who was feeding Butz his information, but the group was rather taken with this rumor.

“Wait a second, Leonardo. I didn’t know about this either...” Ein muttered.

“Y-Your Highness?! Please don’t look so sad!”

“Oooh, you made Ein cry!” Butz chided.

“I thought we were friends. You’re the worst...” Loran murmured.

“Argh! Fine! All right! I’ll tell you, Your Highness! Please listen well!”

“Oooh yes! So what kind of person is she?” Ein said, looking as energetic as ever.

“Y-You tricked me!”

The deceitful trio of Ein, Butz, and Loran howled in a fit of laughter. As their chuckling bounced around the forest, the young pup trotted around the lively campfire while handing out chunks of freshly grilled rabbit.

“Okay, let’s hear Leonardo out while we’re eating,” the werewolf said.

“Nice! Thanks a bunch!” Butz said.

“Thank you. I’ll take some of that,” Leonardo said, his eyes looking weary.

“And here’s your piece, Dill,” Loran said as he offered a chunk of rabbit to the bodyguard.

“Hm? No need. I have some portable meals on me, so eat amongst yourselves,” Dill replied.

Everyone knew that Dill was a strict and stern person, but his mannerisms seemed to indicate that he wasn’t too nervous.

“It’d be a waste if we had leftovers, and we don’t have time to dry the meat out. It’d be a huge help if you could eat with us, Dill,” Ein said.

“I understand. If that’s what Your Excellency wishes, I shall join you.”

Dill accepted the offer and walked over to sit by the group. After sitting down, he took out a small bag from his pocket.

“Then I shall give you something in return,” he said.

The bag contained tea leaves.

Leonardo frowned. “I-I think this would be considered cheating.”

“Indeed, but this is customary. I’ve heard from my peers that they brought a few things with them as well. The academy has permitted us to give you items such as this,” Dill replied.

This was an act of goodwill on the part of the Royal Academy, for they didn’t host many school events. Upon seeing Leonardo’s approval, Dill proceeded to stuff a handful of leaves into their mugs.

“W-Wait, does that mean we’re the only group that’s been this stupidly honest so far?” Butz said.

Loran laughed. “Probably, but I don’t think it’s anything to be embarrassed about.”

“Precisely. I suppose it’s no sin to have some fun during this trip. We can take the kind offer,” Leonardo added.

With the unexpected spot of tea, the group found themselves enjoying a satisfying meal. Slightly bending the rules was a fitting custom for students such as them. As they polished off their last bites of rabbit, the boys chatted about Leonardo’s engagement before the first day of their field trip came to a close.

The group woke up early the next morning before packing up camp and going about their way.

Ein couldn’t help but note the obscured view as the group walked along. “The fog’s awful today.”

“We’re in a forest and one that’s on an island to boot. You two in the back, don’t stray too far away from me or Ein,” Butz warned.

“I know. I’m a bit of a slow walker. I apologize for causing trouble for the both of you,” Leonardo said.

“Yeah. I should’ve exercised a bit more...” Loran sadly said as he flattened his ears.

It was the second day of their field trip and it was becoming more difficult for the boys to fully grasp their surroundings. The dense foliage that ran along the poorly maintained trail wasn't helping things either.

"Butz, is there a landmark or something we can use?" Ein asked.

"I see what you're getting at, but I can't see a thing through this fog. I'm trying my best to keep us going in the right direction at the very least."

"I've been thinking... Why don't we wait for the fog to clear out a little bit?" Loran suggested.

"That wouldn't be a problem, but there's no sign of this fog letting up. Jeez, I feel like our trip is tougher than everyone else's," Butz said.

With Ein's entourage included, a total of seven groups were currently in the middle of their field trips. To prevent any of these groups from crossing paths, they were all dropped off on different islands. Ein chortled to himself, thinking that he'd been struck by his rotten luck.

"We've gotta keep moving. Stay close behind us!" Butz said, calling out from the front line.

Ein was right on the redhead's tail while Leonardo and Loran were walking side by side at the rear of the party.

"Hey, Loran. Could you make a magical tool that disperses the fog?" Ein asked.

"Who do you think I am, Ein? Do you think I can craft magical tools that control the weather?" the werewolf asked.

"Right, I get it. Sorry."

"I actually can, but not with what we have on hand."

He can?! He's awesome...

"I've actually made one before and they're not too hard to put together. I can show you how next time."

Ein was enamored with Loran's genius. He was especially taken with the fact that the werewolf could craft such a tool if given the proper materials.

“Dill, Loran’s really...” Ein stopped “Huh? Dill?” He was unable to hear his bodyguard, who was supposed to be closely watching the group.

“Hey, what’s wrong, Ein?” Butz asked.

“Wait here. Dill! Can you answer me?”

The prince continued to call for his bodyguard, but was only met with silence. Dill was nowhere to be found.

“Hey, Ein! Stop!” Butz shouted.

“Why? Dill’s missing!”

“Just lower your voice or we’ll... Ah shoot, too late. We’ve got company! You two, stay with me and Ein! Don’t wander off!”

“Huh? Huh? What?!” Loran yelped.

“Calm down. Come with me!” Leonardo pulled the werewolf along, placing themselves between Butz and Ein.

A moment later, Butz’s face became deathly pale upon hearing a high-pitched screech that ripped through the air.

“H-Huh? I’ve never heard of that monster showing up here! Ein!”

“Y-Yes?!”

“That’s a Crow Butterfly! It paralyzes its victims before laying its eggs inside them! That monster is nothing like the pushovers we’ve already faced! Stay vigilant!”

Ein’s stance stiffened before he dedicated his full attention to their predicament. He was worried about the missing Dill, but the group was currently under attack. He instinctively unsheathed his jet-black blade and listened closely to his surroundings.

“Wh-Whoaaa! What was that?!” Loran shrieked.

Butz stood in front to protect him.

“If you see a large, black butterfly, that’s our target! Let me know if it gets close!” Butz said.

“Let you know, Butz?! I recommend that we flee!” Leonardo shouted.

“Good idea! But Crow Butterflies usually travel in swarms, so that means—”

Ein agreed that this couldn’t end well. His unfortunate prediction quickly became a reality as a mass of large shadows—shadows that dwarfed most adults—slowly emerged from the mist.

“Butz! There’s too many of them! There’s easily ten at the very least!”

“That many?! Screw this!”

Butz turned white as a sheet upon confirming the sheer size of the swarm heading their way.

“I’m not too familiar with monsters, but how strong are they?!” Loran asked.

“They’re much weaker than the Red Bison, but look at how many there are!”

The warriors on the front line glanced at each other and chose to run. Not to mention that Ein wasn’t willing to whip out his Phantom Hands either. The four boys deeply gulped and ran as fast as they could; cutting down a decent number of the Crow Butterflies as they desperately ran through the dense fog.

They’d been running for at least ten minutes when they finally found a cave to hide out in. Their legs were shot from all the running, prompting the boys to stop and catch their breath.

Butz angrily grabbed Ein by the collar and snarled at him. “Damn it Ein, you idiot! Raising your voice in that place is just asking to be killed!”

“I know. My emotions got the better of me and I couldn’t help myself. I’m sorry,” Ein said.

“Butz, don’t take that attitude with His Highness,” Leonardo reprimanded.

“No, that was completely my fault. I just wonder where Dill is.”

The prince was sick with worry. He knew that Dill was stronger than the average knight, but Ein feared for the worst: that his knight had been attacked by the swarm.

“Whatever. I think all of this is weird, no matter how you slice it,” Butz said as he sat next to the prince.

The trio nodded back at him in response. As the group rested within the cave, Butz continued to share his insights.

“Crow Butterflies shouldn’t be anywhere near here. They *should* be far away from civilization, in the kind of places where Blackvorns run amok. There’s no way that they’d be on a small island like this.”

“Which makes this an abnormal situation. I see,” Ein said.

“Yeah, it’s very unusual. So I’ve thought of two options. We could wait here and call for help. Since it’s an emergency situation, we might get some assistance. Or we fight our way through them and keep heading for our destination.”

Both options presented a plethora of challenges and the group was unable to quickly come to a decision.

The timid Loran quivered, but he was also worried for Dill’s well-being. “I wonder if Dill’s all right...”

“Your Highness, can we hide here? Perhaps wait for Dame Christina and the others to rescue us?” Leonardo asked.

“Probably not. Chris has left the royal capital with my mother for work-related business.”

The group couldn’t rely on immediate assistance. Butz made a decision on behalf of the group. “Then we need to press on. It’ll be foolish for us to stay here, especially if there’s no guarantee that help’s on the way.”

“I agree. We might be in danger if we stay here,” Ein said.

“If His Highness has made his decision, I have no reason to object,” Leonardo added.

“Same here. I’ll leave the fighting to you, but I’ll do my best to support you all!” Loran said.

The group slowly peeked out from the cave. After confirming that the Crow Butterflies were gone, the boys tried to remain hidden as they slunk towards their initial destination.

A few hours had passed since they left the cave, but the thick fog continued to impede the group's progress. By using a trick with the sun, the boys were able to figure out roughly what direction they were heading in. While they knew that turning back wasn't an option, their tired minds wandered.

The shrill screeching of the Crow Butterflies caused the boys to wince more than once as they continued along the trail. It was obvious that the monsters were searching for their prey.

They stopped off by a narrow stretch of river to rest and hydrate. Loran and Leonardo appeared to be exhausted as the pair practically fell to the ground.

"Hey, Leonardo. There's no need to set up your barrier," Butz said.

"Hm? Why's that?"

"Monsters will often notice the barrier's activation and strike once it goes down. At least that's what I've heard from my father. I'd also want to have it for an emergency."

Some cunning monsters were aware of barriers and would pounce the moment it was gone. Given that Crow Butterflies were considered to be quite intelligent, Butz wasn't about to allow a barrier to be erected.

"You truly are the fruits of your father's—I mean Baron Krim's education," Leonardo said.

"He's always fighting monsters in hairy situations, so I've learned a thing or two from him."

After a short break, Butz provided some additional insights on Crow Butterflies. The bugs had two main weaknesses: fire and sunlight. Though they were fine if obscured by mist or fog, Crow Butterflies would quickly disintegrate when in contact with direct sunlight. It was good information, but the boys had no way to exploit these weaknesses; the group was surrounded by dense fog and none of them could use fire magic.

"How should we go about sleeping tonight? Leonardo and Loran would be pushing it if they didn't rest," Ein said.

"We'll keep watch in shifts and leave before sunrise. I want to get out of the

fog while the sun's rising," Butz said.

The four eventually made their way to a small clearing close to the entrance of a similarly small cave. Butz was hesitant to lead the boys inside the cavern.

"Don't go any farther, Ein," Butz warned.

"Hm? Why? It's probably best to head inside if we can. Is there a dangerous monster lurking around in there?" the prince asked.

"Take a look at the gravel around the front of the entrance. Something purple is starting to melt it away."

"I see."

"Looks like miasma has spread through this cave. You tend to get it when old magic and monster corpses mix together. Miasma's poisonous nature tends to make areas around it uninhabitable, unless you're a creature that lives in it, that is. It's not a good idea to breathe the fumes; even slight exposure to the stuff is bad news. We should be okay if we stay by the entrance though."

"I understand. I'll be careful."

Poison and monsters went hand in hand, so it wasn't unusual for entire caves to release toxic chemicals. Ein was curious as to what lived in the bowels of the miasmic cave.

"Are there monsters inside then?"

"Of course, but probably nothing very dangerous. Large bugs maybe? Miasma fumes are good at taking out Crow Butterflies, but I don't think we could get them to fly that way."

"Miasma... I see."

"Hey, guys! Stop talking about that scary stuff and help us get things around!" Loran called.

"Ah, my bad. Let's help them out, Ein!"

"Roger that."

Thinking that the miasma was being taken far too lightly, Leonardo hastily

approached Butz.

“Wait, are you sure it’s safe for us to be here?!” he asked.

“Yeah. It doesn’t spew from the entrance, so just stay out of the cave. All right?”

“A-All right... If you say so...”

With Leonardo giving his reluctant approval, the group prepared to set up camp. Since sleeping left them open to attack, Leonardo decided to set up his barrier. They were able to get water from a nearby river, but the fruit they’d picked along the way didn’t make for a very satisfying meal.

“I guess we should be thankful that we *do* have something to eat, but it’s not really going to help with our stamina,” Ein said.

“Yeah. It’s not filling at all, but as you say, better than nothing,” Butz agreed.

“But these fruits are fresh! And I don’t think they taste bad at all!” Loran said.

Once they settled down, Ein sat on the ground before losing himself in deep thought. *I can’t shake this feeling of uneasiness... I wonder why.* There were a couple things that just weren’t adding up. It was odd that they’d lost sight of Dill, and that swarm of Crow Butterflies was also concerning.

I know I shouldn’t be saying this, but I doubt the crown prince would’ve been sent to such a dangerous place. At the very least, this island must have been well-researched before I was sent here. Dill isn’t someone who’d just disappear either...but more than anything, I can’t imagine Warren being so careless in overseeing this trip. Then what’s really weird is...

Ein realized that he might have had it all wrong. There was a good chance he misunderstood exactly what was causing his uneasiness. *I’m getting confused.* He casually gazed at the trees around him. There was no one there, but Ein thought he could sense someone’s presence.

He shook his head, thinking he must’ve been seeing things. After all, his exhaustion had most likely put him on edge.

After an unsatisfying dinner, a bored Ein was engaged in a conversation with Butz.

“Speaking of large monsters, it’s gotta be the Sea Dragon, right?” Butz said. Ein was familiar with the name. “I heard it’s a dragon larger than warships and that it appears once every one to two centuries.”

“I heard about that from Chris before. How do you defeat it?” Ein asked.

“Cooperation? Working together to beat the monster, right?”

Butz seemed nonchalant about it all, but Ein couldn’t think of another solution. The prince thought about how he’d fight the beast—various methods came to his mind, but he didn’t think he could simply slay it with his sword.

“The monster takes hundreds of years to grow, right? Then after that it goes on a disastrous rampage on Ishtarica’s oceans, port cities, and ships. My father has told me that since ancient times, countless knights have given their lives to defeat the dragon.”

“It’d be great if it never appeared.”

“I agree. Why don’t you use the royal family’s absolute royal edict and say that right to the Sea Dragon’s face?”

“Huh? What’s that? An edict?”

“I don’t know the full details either, but I do know that it’s a command that only the royal family can use... Hey, why don’t *you* know about it?!”

Ein gave a weak smile. *I feel like grandfather talked about the Sea Dragon before.* Silverd had mentioned the Sea Dragon before—a monster that he was wary of.

“I’m going to the bathroom, I’ll be right back,” Ein said.

“Yeah, go.”

The swarm of Crow Butterflies was their primary concern. After taking care of his business behind the cave, Ein stopped in front of the cavern’s entrance and extended his arm towards it. *Hm, so it’s like poison...* He discreetly activated his Toxin Decomposition skill, causing the slight purple hues in the air to dissipate. The prince couldn’t help but grin thinking about how convenient his skill had

been in this situation.

“Hey Ein, what’re you doing?!” Butz called. He had noticed Ein standing off in the distance.

“I almost tripped! I’ll be back!”

While standing in front of the cave, Ein remembered what Butz had said before they sat down to rest. He also thought of the magical tool Loran had crafted to act as a canteen.

“Wait, maybe I can use that,” Ein said, coming to a realization. He returned to camp and called out to Loran. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Hm? What’s wrong?” the werewolf asked.

“Could that tool you made be used to contain things other than water?”

“I’m sure it can, but why do you ask?”

“There’s something I’d like to hold on to...”

Ein was truly grateful to have a technical genius like Loran by his side—a wunderkind that the prince had chosen to rely on. Once the boys had fallen asleep, Butz’s fears had come to pass. A few Crow Butterflies watched on from just outside the barrier. Realizing that the group was in a clearing with light fog cover, the monsters decided to wait and have the party come to them. The butterflies melted into the shadows, awaiting the group’s exit from the barrier’s protection.

The next morning, the Crow Butterflies had disappeared, perhaps due to the harsh sunlight that beat upon the land.

“Ein, what are you gonna use that tool for?” Loran asked.

“A secret. I’ll let you know when I use it.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this...” Loran said, looking exhausted.

“All right, everyone! Let’s head to our destination and get off this crazy island!” Butz yelled.

“Hey, why are *you* in charge? We’ve got His Highness here with us.”

“I don’t really mind,” Ein said. “Besides, Butz has been a big help.”

“Oh? You get me, Ein! Okay, let’s do this!”

Butz led the group as they merrily walked along in the same formation as yesterday. *I’ll do what I can, but I have to return and find Dill*, Ein thought. However, Butz’s description of their surroundings as a “crazy island” stuck with the prince. *Crazy island... He’s not wrong. I still don’t believe that Warren would have overlooked the danger either.*

The chancellor was arguably the most intelligent man in Ishtarica; he certainly wouldn’t have missed any signs of trouble. Had anyone caught a glimpse of Crow Butterflies, Warren would’ve heard of it. In that case, the field trip would have been canceled or moved to another island. Ein groaned and sighed; things didn’t add up.

“Come on, Ein! What’re you dawdling around for?!” Butz called.

“Y-Yeah, sorry. I’m coming.”

A field trip’s third day would normally be its last, but Ein wasn’t able to drum up any kind of excitement within himself as he left camp. An uncomfortable feeling was tearing at his heart.

The road was much flatter in comparison to the rocky trails they’d been walking for the past few days. Thanks to the easy-to-traverse terrain, the boys were hopeful that they’d reach the peninsula sooner than they expected.

“Jeez, I never wanna do this again,” Butz grumbled.

“I feel the same. I won’t be willing to do this twice,” Leonardo said.

“Yeah, but on the bright side, I’ve decided to work out more once we get home,” Loran said.

Without the screeching of the Crow Butterflies, the party’s mood was a bit more relaxed. While they felt things were a bit too quiet, the boys felt lucky that they hadn’t encountered any monsters on the road so far.

But that luck quickly ran out.

“Butz,” Ein said, noticing that something was closing in on their location.

“Yeah, the fog here is a bit dense too. We’re being targeted.”

The group was too far down the road to turn back—the only way out was to move forward. Ein closed his eyes and concentrated on all five of his senses. With his unique ability to sense magic stones, he noticed that a swarm of butterflies was heading their way.

“H-Huh?” Ein muttered. He sensed a different type of magic stone among the Crow Butterflies.

Hm, I see... He couldn’t see anyone nearby, but Ein gave a faint smile. When he honed in on the different stone mixed among the Crow Butterflies, he realized that it belonged to someone he knew very well. For the first time in a few days, he smiled from the bottom of his heart.

“Loran, Leonardo! Stay with Ein and me!” Butz said.

Screeches could be heard in the distance; the Crow Butterflies were coming in for the kill.

“Run! Hurry!” Butz yelled.

They ran towards the peninsula, hoping for any combat advantage the terrain might give them. Unfortunately, nothing of the sort came into view.

“Leonardo!” Ein called.

“Y-Yes, Your Highness?!”

“Can your barrier block poisons too?”

“P-Poison?! For several minutes I believe! Why do you ask?!”

“I’m relieved to hear that! Now hurry!”

Leonardo was puzzled by Ein’s sudden question, but he had no time to ponder over it. Leonardo and Loran were desperately trying to keep up with their frontline compatriots. Unable to shake the butterflies, the group had scrambled to a nearby area. Butz believed that this terrain was the party’s best bet at slaying their pursuers.

“Leonardo, put up your barrier!” Ein loudly called out.

“Wait, Ein! Even if we put one up here, they’ll attack us the moment the

barrier fades!” Butz shouted. He thought the plan was useless and that it would only buy them a little time at most.

“I know what you’re saying, but I still need the barrier. Leonardo!”

“I understand!” Leonardo brought himself to the ground and started preparing the barrier.

From afar, a swarm of Crow Butterflies could be seen flying straight for the group. With Loran and Leonardo on the back lines, Ein and Butz firmly stood their ground to face the oncoming threat.

“I have no idea what we’re doing, but you better hurry, Leonardo! We won’t be able to hold these monsters off for long!” Butz shouted.

“I know!”

A few Crow Butterflies approached the front line. If they attacked in small numbers, the bugs were easy pickings. Butz’s slashes at the monsters made openings for Ein to go in and finish the job. However, Butz found himself making a fatal error as the boys were pushed back by the growing swarm.

“Ugh... D-Damn it...” he weakly muttered as he fell to the ground, paralyzed.

“Butz! Curse you, bugs!” Ein yelled as he sliced a monster with his shortsword.

When the group thought that all was lost, Leonardo’s voice suddenly cut through the air.

“I’m sorry for keeping you guys waiting!”

A white light enveloped their surroundings as Leonardo activated his barrier. The monsters bearing down on them were pushed back by the barrier’s expansion. In the party’s greatest moment of need, Leonardo had bought them some much needed time.

“Butz, are you all right?!” Ein said.

“I can’t really move or talk, but I’m okay. I never thought I’d almost have eggs laid inside me.”

“But why did you ask Leonardo to use his barrier, Ein? Do you have a plan?” Loran asked.

“I do, but it’s an all-or-nothing kind of deal,” the prince replied.

If his plan failed... *I’d probably have to ask for help from my friend hanging out in the middle of the swarm.* Ein didn’t dare vocalize his thoughts and sat down.

“Your Highness, I was a bit confused when you told me to put up a barrier. Just what are you planning?”

“I’ll explain, but give me a moment. I’m tired,” Ein replied.

If successful, the prince’s gamble would take out the entire swarm.

“Have a drink! I’ve got plenty of water left over from yesterday!” Loran offered.

“Thank you. Whew. I’m sure I’d enjoy this swig a bit more if we weren’t in the middle of this mess.” Ein gulped down the water and caught his breath. “I’m going to use the tool Loran gave me.”

“Wait. Loran, what did you give to His Highness?” Leonardo asked, hoping that Loran hadn’t given the prince anything dangerous.

“Don’t look at me with that scary face... It’s something really simple. It just stores the air around you, but it’s a bit larger than the ones that you see in stores,” Loran replied.

“Fine... What are you planning, Ein?” Butz asked.

“That’s a secret, but don’t worry,” the prince said.

The trio was baffled by Ein’s nonexistent explanation, but the prince sincerely seemed to be taking things seriously.

“Your Highness, is there anything we could do?”

“Leonardo, I just need you to keep your barrier up.”

“I-Is that all?”

“Wait, Ein. That sounds like you’re going to do something all on your own,” Butz started.

“That’s right. The plan will fail if I don’t do it alone. It’s what I have to do,” Ein replied.

“Don’t be stupid. I’m not gonna let you do something so dangerous.”

“I’ll be fine, Butz. You’re the one who taught me that it’d be effective, after all.”

“Huh? I did?”

Ein looked up at the trees. “There’s so many of them. It’s a little gross to look at.”

The Crow Butterflies were all perched on a large tree nearby, waiting for their prey to leave the barrier.

“It’s not really something I relish looking at,” Leonardo said.

After giving a quick “uh-huh,” Ein started to limber up. The other three looked on in astonishment, but the prince sounded rather cheerful.

“I’ll take care of it. And I’m off,” he said.

“Your Highness? By off, do you mean...”

“Yep. I’ll take ‘em all out!”

The prince rushed out of the barrier. Anyone from within could leave the barrier, but no one could enter. Using this to his advantage, Ein leaped out from its boundaries.

He heard the other three boys yelling his name.

“Good gracious, I’ll have to scold Dill later...though I doubt he was the first person to think of this,” Ein muttered as he ran, leaving the rest of his group behind.

His exhaustion soon caught up with him and he quickly ran out of breath. Despite that, Ein refused to rely on anyone but himself. Thinking of the masterminds behind this little field trip, the prince stood proud and resolute.

“If I can self-destruct without feeling an ounce of pain, I’ll surely be considered strong!” he bellowed.

He removed an item from his pocket as the Crow Butterflies flew straight at him. The simple tool he held in hand was crafted by Loran to trap the air around it. When thrown to the ground, the tool would shatter and expel its contents.

“You guys really don’t like this, do you? Well, take a breath of fresh air!” Ein said as he smashed the tool against the ground. As the item shattered, it released a small woosh of force before familiar purple hues floated up into the air.

“Endure the miasma if you can!”

Ein remembered Butz’s little factoid about the butterflies’ weakness to miasma. As soon as the poison-touched air grazed the monsters, they started falling to the ground like flies.

“Good.”

All that Ein needed to do now was lecture a handful of folks. As he’d defeated the monsters in a way only he could, the boy was feeling especially victorious. He raised his arms into the air and signaled his friends behind the barrier.

“I haven’t mentioned it, but I have a skill that makes me resistant against poison and the like. Miasma included,” Ein nonchalantly mentioned, not daring to say his skill’s real name.

“Your Highness, please don’t give us a scare like that...”

“I’m sorry, but everything turned out fine. So please forgive me,” Ein replied.

“There’s a few things I also want to say, but you did save us. I didn’t think a tool could be used like that,” Loran said.

“Yeah. Ein acted like he was some sort of human weapon,” Butz said.

“You’re the one who told me that Crow Butterflies were weak to miasma,” Ein said.

“Ah, so *that’s* what you were talking about.” Butz pridefully scratched his nose, happy his insights had proved useful.

“Are you sure that I can have all of their magic stones?” Loran asked.

“Yeah. I don’t have a use for them and you gave me your tool anyways. Is that all right with you guys?” Ein said, turning to the rest of the group.

“I don’t mind. Loran *did* play a major role in assisting His Highness, after all,”

Leonardo said.

“Same here. You did well!” Butz said.

In truth, Ein had absorbed one of the Crow Butterflies’ stones. However, he wasn’t crazy about the bitter taste it left in his mouth. Thus, he’d decided to give Loran the rest of the stones.

“I’m grateful. I don’t have enough of an allowance for tools, so this helps a lot,” Loran said as his ears energetically twitched about. He couldn’t keep his tail from wagging one bit.

About time... Ein thought. He could sense the presence of others as the group continued walking down the road. The fog had finally dissipated, leaving the trail clear and surprisingly monster free—not even a slime appeared. It made for a rather refreshing and peaceful walk as the party grew closer to their destination.

“I see the peninsula. That’s where we should be heading. Dill should already be there,” Ein said after several minutes.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Butz said just before he noticed the bodyguard.

“D-Dill’s really there!” Loran cried.

As Ein had expected, he saw a worried Dill standing by their destination.

“E-E-Ein?! How did you...?!” Butz stammered.

“I don’t know the details. It’s best that we ask Dill,” the prince replied.

He narrowed his eyes and approached a downcast Dill, who closed the gap between them.

“I’ve been waiting, Your Excellency. The skill you employed in dispatching those beasts was splendid. Your party members were quite wonderful in the utilization of their abilities as well.”

Dill highly praised everyone in the group, but Ein didn’t reply in kind. With an icy gaze, the prince glared at his bodyguard. The other three felt the air around them grow tense, and they gingerly turned to Ein.

“Do you know just how worried we were?” Ein asked.

“Certainly. You went searching for me the moment I disappeared. It moved me and I deeply apologize for my actions.”

Dill knelt and bowed his head as he earnestly apologized before waiting for his master’s response. Seconds felt like minutes as Ein remained silent, his frosty glare still locked on the bodyguard until he sighed deeply.

“You weren’t behind this, were you? I need you to explain yourself to me and the rest of the group.” He continued his line of questioning after ordering Dill to his feet. “Was it my grandfather? Maybe Warren? Both of them perhaps?”

“Splendidly sharp, Your Excellency,” Dill said as he started his story.

Not long before the field trip was to commence, a group had gathered for a meeting within one of White Night Castle’s many rooms.

“Will Ein and his friends be safe?” Silverd asked.

“Most certainly. I’ve had Chris keep her schedule open and the island itself shouldn’t be an issue,” Warren replied.

“It shall be a trying expedition, draining on the body and mind.”

“However, it will be a good experience. A tad forceful, but it’s all so that Sir Ein can grow as a person.”

“Indeed. Then let’s review the plan, shall we?”

Dill would guard the boys before being separated from the group in the middle of the trip. From there, the knights would release the monsters they’d prepared and begin their observation. Despite the danger involved, the group’s safety was guaranteed. A few of Warren’s top agents and Chris would be watching over the proceedings. No one would truly be in danger, serving to show just how bold and meticulous the plan was.

“Here are the letters of consent from the other parents. None of them have levied any complaints our way,” Warren said.

“You didn’t coerce them into signing, did you?”

“Absolutely not. In your name, I assured them that the children would remain unharmed. They were able to give their consent afterwards.”

“Very well.”

Silverd stared at the trio of names on the letters before him: Leonardo of House Pholus, Butz of House Krim, and Loran—the son of a castle town studio owner. The preparations were complete; all that was left was to simply wait for the day of the trip.

Lloyd had then passed the details of the plan down to Dill.

“I need to leave in the middle?” Dill asked.

“Yes. His Majesty and Warren would like Sir Ein to face various challenges,” Lloyd replied.

“I see. I understand.”

“Hm? You’re acting quite obediently today.”

“His Excellency should be fine. It’s just the disappearance of one bodyguard. I’m sure he’ll respond to the situation with a cool and collected mind.”

Troubled by his son’s words, Lloyd tilted his head off to the side.

A week later, Dill joined Ein’s group on the island as their guard. After the first night, they’d entered an area with dense fog—the perfect place for Dill to sneak away. Dill knew that the prince was intelligent and expected him to remain calm.

“Wait here. Dill! Can you answer me?” Ein’s voice echoed through the mist.

The genuine concern in the prince’s words had stopped Dill in his tracks. He couldn’t resist turning around, shocked that the prince feared for the safety of a simple guard.

“Hey, Ein! Stop!” Butz shouted.

“Why? Dill’s missing!”

Ein insisted on searching for Dill, but Butz had made the right call in this instance. Dill was confused by his master calling out to him.

“Why does he go to such lengths for me?” Dill muttered, unable to think of an

explanation while Ein continued to desperately search for him.

As night fell, Dill monitored the group from a faraway treetop. The would-be knight and his fellow guards remained unnoticed through the use of a magical tool that rendered its user invisible. The guards took turns watching over the boys, ready to jump into action should anything happen.

Chris suddenly let out a gasp. “Impossible...”

“Dame Christina? Are you all right?”

“I think I just locked eyes with Sir Ein. I might be overthinking it, though.”

“That can’t be. The magical tool shrouds us in invisibility, not to mention that it’s pitch-black out this evening.”

“True. I might be overthinking it, but he might be catching on.”

Chris hit a bull’s-eye—her suspicions were confirmed the next day, while the fog was at its thickest and the monsters were on the move.

“It’s no good. He’s found us,” she said.

Dill and the other guards looked back at her with their jaws agape. She claimed that he had smirked back at her upon making eye contact.

“That can’t be... How did His Excellency detect us?” Dill asked.

“Ack! It’s because there’s a magic stone in me! Sir Ein could sense me!”

The prince had been suspicious of his surroundings since his second night on the island. Chris gave up the act and the guards approached the party to check in on them.

Ein’s use of miasma to defeat the Crow Butterflies had brought the trial to a conclusion.

“And that’s my story. I know it was only to help you, but I’m sorry for troubling you,” Dill said.

Ein sternly looked back at his guard. “Do you know how worried I was?” His words were even colder than his gaze, exuding a terrifying aura.

“Your Excellency. I’m just your guard. As a person of your position, I believe it unwise to worry too much about—”

“That’s not what I asked. I said, ‘Do you know how worried I was?’ I’ll ask again. Do you?”

“E-Even if you say so, His Majesty has...”

“I see. So you *don’t* get how worried I was.” Ein approached Dill. The prince no longer cared what his grandfather would have to say about the words about to leave his mouth. “I guess I’ll need to tell my grandfather to test me with something else.”

“Your Excellency, you mustn’t act that way towards His Majesty—”

“You’ve been guarding me this entire time! If I’m not mature enough to consider our relationship as purely professional, that’s fine. If that’s what it means to be an adult, then I don’t need to be one.”

Dill fell silent at Ein’s passionate words.

“If you *ever* do something like that again, I’ll be there to save you! No matter what!” Ein shouted.

“You mustn’t. What would happen if this wasn’t training and you were in actual danger?”

“Then promise me. Promise me you’ll never worry me with a stunt like this again. Are we clear?”

Ein had never been so strongly assertive before; it was a side of the boy that Dill had obviously never seen. The rest of the prince’s party could only anxiously look on.

“I understand,” Dill said, relenting. “It seems I’ve caused you great distress, far beyond what I could have imagined. You have my deepest apologies, Your Excellency.”

“As long as you understand. Wait...if you really *are* sorry there’s one more thing you can do.”

“I’m terribly sorry, but I cannot call you by your name. We’ve been over this.”

“Argh! Fine, fine, I got it! I thought you’d say yes after this!”

Ein’s smiling face had quickly turned gloomy as a result of Dill’s latest rejection.

“It’d be rude if I did that as an apology. With that in mind, I’d like to make a request,” Dill said as he knelt before the prince. “Your Excellency, Sir Ein. Please allow me to be by your side.”

His roundabout manner of speaking might have been annoying to some, but Ein simply responded with a broad smile. The prince was so tired that he was unable to hide his joy, laughing so hard that he started to cry. Ein was finally convinced that he and his guard were close now.

He wiped a tear from his eye. “Ah, that was funny! I’ve been working so hard to get you to do that, but I didn’t expect it to come so easily! You’ve knocked the wind out of my sails.”

Ein outstretched his hand to Dill. “I’ll forgive you for today. There won’t be a second chance, okay?”

“I understand. You have my gratitude.”

The prince had offered to shake his guard’s hand many times before, but Dill had always thought it to be insolent. However, the pair were now finally shaking hands and exchanging smiles.



With their grueling three day and two night expedition in the books, the boys embarked on a ship setting sail for the royal capital. The roughly 130-meter ship was owned by the Royal Academy and was nowhere near the size of a warship. Ein stood next to Chris on the deck as he enjoyed the ocean breeze.

“Chris, we locked eyes in the forest, didn’t we? I don’t think that was just my imagination,” Ein said.

“Wh-Whatever are you talking about? I haven’t the faintest—”

“You’re lying, aren’t you? I think you were frantically looking around in a panic.”

“Ugh...”

Since the whole scheme had already come to light, there was no reason for Chris to resist. With about thirty minutes to go before they reached the royal capital, Ein and Chris continued to carry on a conversation.

“So you *were* frantically looking around?” Ein asked. “I knew that we made eye contact, but I couldn’t see how you reacted.”

“Y-You tricked me!”

“I see. I guess it’s worth bluffing on occasion.”

“Goodness... I’d thought you’d become bolder, but it seems like you’re even more mischievous now to boot.”

“I have Aunt Katima with me. I learn from the best.”

Chris was deep in thought as she leaned on the railing. It wasn’t good if Katima and Ein were *too* close, it seemed. The calm waves and smell of the ocean gradually soothed Ein’s tired bones.

“In any case, I must speak with grandfather about that trial. I can’t condone it,” Ein said.

“But His Majesty had done so in hopes that you’ll grow as a person, Sir Ein. That’s what I’ve been told.”

“I know, but... I just don’t feel right about these methods of doing so.”

Ein was willing to go through a few trials and tribulations if it was necessary

for him to do so as the crown prince. However, Ein couldn't stand the methodology behind this particular trial, so much that it caused a nagging feeling deep within his heart.

"I'll think about it until we get home. If push comes to shove, I don't mind ignoring my grandfather for a few days," Ein said.

"P-Please don't do that."

Ein had become much closer to Dill, and Chris was quite eager to report on the boys' blossoming relationship upon their return to the Royal Capital.

Suddenly, the waves started to grow rough. Something had occurred, abruptly ending the brief moment of peace shared by the knight and her prince.

"Huh? What's going on?" Ein asked.

He leaned over the railing to get a better look. In an instant, Chris pulled the boy back and glared into his eyes.

"Please stay back, Sir Ein. It seems we've run into an unexpected complication," she said.

She unsheathed the rapier holstered by her waist and inhaled deeply, immediately changing the air around her—the tranquil atmosphere was now gone. As if they were answering her call, the knights on board approached the railing. The roaring of the waves grew louder.

"Ready the cannons! All knights, prepare for battle!" she bellowed.

The frantic clatter of the knights' shoes hitting the deck rang through the air. They headed to the cannons located in the head, rear, and sides of the vessel as the ship increased its speed. The waves only crashed harder, shaking the ship.

"Chris, this isn't another trial, is it?" Ein asked.

"I swear to you on my life that it isn't! Please head inside, Sir Ein! N-No, it'd be safer if you stay with me!"

She suddenly reached out and grasped his hand. This had never happened to him before, and Ein gazed at their interlocked hands as he was dragged along. The ocean's surface started to foam, creating a wave the size of a castle.

“A-A monster?!” Ein gasped.

His gaze was fixated on a monster that was roughly half the size of the very ship he was sailing on. The monster’s long, wriggling tentacles resembled those of an octopus or a squid.

“A Kraken?! H-How can it appear so close to shore?!” Chris yelled.

“Chris, this is probably a stupid question to ask given how big it is, but is this monster strong?!”

“I-It’s a monster that even warships struggle against! We might have a little trouble, but this ship should be able to handle it!”

The Kraken was alone, but if one were to include its legs, the beast was much longer than the ship.

“It’s acting a bit odd...” Chris muttered.

While Ein was initially relieved by the knight’s observations, the boy was petrified when she mentioned the beast’s odd behavior. The other knights had noted that the Kraken wasn’t trying to attack the ship, but rather, it was looking for an escape route. *What is it running from?*

Ein could even sense that the monster was afraid. While he was no longer in the grasp of any fear or shock of his own, the prince was still confused by the beast’s awkward movements. As the ship sped away from the Kraken, the beast’s jerking about looked like some kind of premonition.

“We should be able to get away as long as we don’t provoke it. It seems there isn’t a need for these cannons,” Chris murmured.

The pair hoped they could escape without cause for conflict, but those hopes were immediately squashed. Ein felt the ocean starting to rumble like he never had before; as did the Kraken, which flailed away from the ship in a panic.

A deafening roar and groan came bellowing out from the ocean.

“Chris! There must be another monster—” Ein started, but was cut off by a thunderous cry.

“RAAAAAH!”

The main agitator of this commotion had shown its face. The beast's large body dwarfed not only this ship, but the *Princess Olivia* as well.

"Huh?" Ein said. His knees buckled and he fell to the deck.

He was overpowered by the intense aura emanating from the colossal monster in front of his eyes. The beast blew a hole in the head of the fleeing Kraken, with the impact sending the cephalopod into the air. This juggernaut was clearly a predator.

"H-How could it be... Wh-Why is that monster...the Sea Dragon..." Chris stammered as she tried to bring Ein to his feet.

As she spoke, the Sea Dragon had eaten the Kraken in just a few bites. The colossus had a large fin that ran along its back and long, sharp fangs capable of crushing small ships. The Sea Dragon proceeded to create a whirlpool that implied it could freely control the flow of water. A whole buffet of Krakens and other seafaring monsters were sucked into the whirlpool as the dragon stood at its center.

"Th-The Sea Dragon? Chris, you don't mean..." Ein managed to croak out.

As the name implied, it did indeed resemble a dragon. It had a long, lithe, snakelike body covered in pale blue scales. Though its fins weren't wings per se, the appendages allowed the Sea Dragon to slither elegantly through the sea, just as other dragons would soar through the sky.

"RAAAAAH!"

"Ugh!"

Their ship could be crushed just as easily as the Kraken had been. For the first time in his life, Ein was gripped by a fear that burnt itself into his memory.

"Increase the speed! Hurry! We must flee while the Sea Dragon's busy with the Kraken!" Chris yelled, carrying Ein in her arms as she rushed for the control room.

"Ch-Chris? We'll be okay, right? This ship will—" Ein started, but was abruptly cut off.

"Sir Ein, that's the Sea Dragon that we've talked about! It's the very King of

the Seas that gouged out parts of the continent and the royal capital's port!" Chris didn't offer any words of reassurance. "A single ship such as this can do nothing against it, b-but I'll protect you with my life! Please be at ease!"

The only thing they could do was run. Chris put on a brave face for the boy, but large beads of sweat formed on her brow.

"Vice Captain Christina! Our crew says that the furnace is at its limit!" reported her subordinate.

"As long as it's not broken, it's not at its limit! Make them work faster! That's all we can do for now!"

"Y-Yes ma'am!"

Because Chris had scooped Ein up, the prince wasn't able to get a good look at the ocean. However, he was trembling at thoughts of the powerful spray of the waves and the roar of the Sea Dragon, thoughts that had been etched into his mind.

"Don't worry! I'm right here!" Chris shouted, putting her hand on his back.

He knew that he was in the position to be protected, but Ein was irritated that he'd allowed himself to be put in such a disgraceful situation. He bit his lip and stood up, breaking free from Chris's grasp.

"I-I fell just because I twisted my ankle. It's not like I was scared or anything!" he said, mustering everything he had to sound manlier.

Though the situation was dire, Chris smiled when Ein huffed with pride. "Of course. You're as dignified as usual, Sir Ein."

"If needed, I can absorb the Sea Dragon's magic stone!"

"Ah ha ha... If such an opportunity arises, I'll be the one to make that request one day."

The two dashed for the control room. Several minutes later, the ship was successfully able to outrun the Sea Dragon. The colossus was seemingly satisfied after finishing off the Kraken and disappeared into the ocean. Reports of the incident caused quite a ruckus in the royal capital at first, but the Sea Dragon showed no signs of making another appearance in the following

months.

Chapter Five: The Sea Dragon

It was safe to say that his island field trip had been the most hectic time of Ein's academy life. A year and a half later, Ein entered his third year of school without further incident.

It was a sweltering midsummer day, and Ein had left the castle to attend to some of his public duties. Once his business was taken care of, a slightly tired Ein was on his way home. He passed through the main street and was now walking in a sleepy residential district—one that a good handful of aristocrats called home. As he walked on the road's neatly laid out stone tile path, Ein stopped himself and made a remark to his guard.

"Dill, don't you think I'd be allowed to make a bit of a detour?" Ein asked.

Dill smiled as he walked alongside Ein. "Of course you aren't."

"C-Come on! We've got some time still, and we didn't arrive by carriage today!"

"His Majesty has instructed me to never allow you to go off on a side trip. Please forgive me."

"Grandfather's behind this? I didn't think he'd make the first move."

"Perhaps he has some business with you."

"That might be so, but I should be allowed to make a quick stop... Ugh, never mind. I'll hold it back for today."

In high spirits, Lloyd followed the boys as Chris walked next to him. The marshal's son had been expressing himself more than ever before, forming a deeper bond with the crown prince.

"Dill has changed," Chris said, putting Lloyd in a particularly good mood.

"He has, hasn't he?" Lloyd replied. "I didn't think such a stiff boy could change this much. In fact, he's all smiles with his mother every night. I must be grateful for Sir Ein's presence."

“Indeed. He doesn’t refer to the crown prince as ‘His Excellency,’ choosing to call him ‘Sir Ein.’”

“I’ve even heard from other knights that Dill has become easier to speak with as of late.”

“These days, he even has a habit of saying, ‘Sir Ein is a wonderful man.’”

When Dill met the prince after being selected as his bodyguard, the would-be guard hadn’t cracked a single smile. Even Lloyd didn’t expect his son to smile so naturally now.

“I shall accompany you wherever you wish at a later time. I shall tell Sir Warren that you desire to make a detour while you’re out, Sir Ein,” Dill said.

“Okay. Then I guess I’ll hold back this time,” Ein replied.

Dill, who used to never make decisions based on his emotions, had been shown to spoil the crown prince. He was a knight, but above all, he clearly understood that he was *Ein’s* knight.

Some time later, the prince and his entourage passed through the castle’s gates. Olivia had been waiting for her son and approached him before showering him with her usual affection.

“Welcome home, Ein. How was work today?” she asked.

“No problems at all. I feel a bit embarrassed though,” her son replied.

“I’m glad to hear that. You’ve worked hard today as well,” Olivia said with a giggle.

Though Ein had made it clear that he was a bit shy about being hugged by his mother, Olivia didn’t seem to care. As always, the second princess only had Ein in mind at all times. Lloyd and Chris were standing a short distance away.

“I suppose that some things never change. Lady Olivia’s love for Sir Ein is one such example,” Lloyd said to Chris as he let out a laugh.

“Right...” Chris muttered. The knight wished that the princess was more prudent. “Unfortunately, I believe it *has* changed. It’s gotten worse, I think.”

“Hm, perhaps so.”

Olivia's love for her son knew no limits, and it'd only grown by the day. Having seen this firsthand from working under Olivia, Chris couldn't stop herself from letting out a sigh.

That night, Ein was taking a break in a nearby salon after hopping out of the bath.

"Oh, Ein," Krone said as she approached him. By sheer coincidence, she'd just taken a bath as well. "Were you taking a bath too?"

She was friendly as usual, but she seemed more enchanting today. She was slightly blushing due to the warm water, and her silvery-blue hair was still a little damp. The fragrances of scented oils and soap radiating from her hair almost made Ein dizzy.

He tried to calm himself down by hastily chugging the rest of his glass of water. "I just finished my studies, so I thought I'd clean myself up. What about you?"

"Same here. Can I sit next to you?"

There were other places she could sit down, like the sofa, but she decided to sit next to him. After Ein gave his consent, Krone sat beside him and the fragrances of her hair only grew stronger.

"It's odd, isn't it? I was a bit more reserved at first, but I've gotten used to using this castle's large baths," she said.

"You're basically living here, so I don't think you need to act so reserved," Ein replied.

"No. I refuse to be an immodest woman."

Krone's adherence to her strict ideals had won Olivia's favor. Ein took the pitcher on the table and filled their glasses with water.

"Want some water?" Ein asked.

"Yes, thank you."

It was a simple exchange, but he found himself enamored with her hands as

she extended her fingertips. Thin and neatly manicured, her elegant fingers gently pinched the stem of the glass before bringing it to her glossy lips. Again, Ein was enchanted by her alluring quirks.

“Whew. Ein,” she started. The prince was in a daze and had a delayed response. “Don’t you ever do something like this to anyone else, all right? I won’t be responsible if people look at you with concern.”

“My apologies...”

Krone giggled. “It’s fine. I don’t feel bothered when you do it to me.”

“Does that mean I can keep looking?”

The fact that he was caught was an error on his part. He tried to fight back against the proud Krone.

“Certainly. Would you like to get closer?” she asked.

“Huh? Wh-What?”

“Is this close enough? Or should I get closer?”

Krone had called his bluff and now they were practically right next to each other. Their arms brushed together and their thighs were touching.

“I’ve lost,” he said, realizing that he should never have chosen to fight a losing battle.

He remembered reading such advice in a book about military tactics. Since he’d admitted defeat, he expected her to fall back, but she wasn’t so forgiving.

“If I’ve won, that means I can stay like this for a bit longer. Right?” she said.

“So that’s your next move.”

“You don’t want me to act like this?”

“Th-That’s not what I mean, but, um, I’m just a little embarrassed...”

“I know, I just wanted to see you flustered.”

As Krone let out a triumphant giggle, Ein was at his wits’ end. He didn’t think there was any way he could ever win against her.

The pair continued to enjoy their time together until they heard voices

booming from outside the salon.

“Did something happen?” Ein wondered.

“At such a late hour? How odd,” Krone said.

The prince stood up with Krone right behind him as the two headed outside.

“That’s right!” a loud voice rang out.

“Wait, is that voice...” Ein started.

“Sir Lloyd’s?” Krone finished.

“I think so. Something must’ve happened.”

Ein approached the door when he started to hear bits of the conversation.

“Indeed. I’ve received notice of the destruction of a fishing boat that was sailing the distant seas,” Lloyd said.

“But that information alone doesn’t determine the monster that did it,” Warren replied.

“That’s not all. The fishing boat reported seeing a large shadow. In that case, I believe it’s finally made its appearance.”

Sensing the perilous atmosphere, Ein stopped himself.

“E-Ein? Shouldn’t we go in and hear them out?” Krone asked.

“Shhh... Give me a bit,” he replied.

“E-Ein?!”

Fearing that he might not hear the rest of this conversation if he made an appearance, Ein took Krone’s hand and brought her close to keep her mum. Surprised by his sudden action, she fell silent. After eavesdropping on the conversation for a while, a probably bored Krone decided to tickle one of Ein’s hands.

“H-Hey!” he whispered frantically.

“Payback. You were suddenly being so sly,” she whispered.

Ein flashed her a strained smile before refocusing his attention on the conversation.

“We must quickly send our warships to Magna,” Lloyd said.

“Indeed... I must contact the necessary people as well,” Warren agreed.

“It wouldn’t be odd for it to make an appearance any day now. We’re lucky that it hasn’t suddenly emerged yet.”

“Then our warships should be on the move tomorrow.”

The conversation ended with Warren’s last statement and the presence of people at the door faded a short time later.

“Is he talking about the Sea Dragon?” Ein wondered.

He thought back to over a year ago, when he’d come face-to-face with the King of the Seas on his way back from the field trip. Ein relived the terror and dread he’d felt, causing his palms to become sweaty. He decided to return to the salon and reorganize his thoughts.

“Um, Krone?” Ein said.

“Yes?”

“You can let go of my hand now.”

Ein had released his hand multiple times already, but Krone refused to let go. She compared the sizes of their hands and tickled him in between his fingers. Her tricks were far more varied than he’d imagined; he’d never tire of her.

“Must I let go? You were the one who grabbed me first,” she said.

“I did that to eavesdrop...”

“But that doesn’t mean we should stop holding hands just because they stopped talking.”

There was no reason for them to continue holding hands either, but Ein wasn’t skilled enough to beat her in this debate.

“Did something happen? Your heartbeat feels louder,” she said.

“Something’s happening right *now*. I get so nervous when we just hold hands that I can feel them getting clammy.”

He’d thought of the excuse on the fly, but he felt it was convincing enough. In

the end, the conversation he'd listened in on had left his mind. The pair continued to walk around the castle while holding hands until they reached her room.

The next morning, Ein's day was off to a busy start as he stood in front of the castle gates.

"Sir Ein, your necktie! Your necktie is crooked!" Chris said, hastily approaching the boy.

Ein had woken up at an unusually late time that day and was behind on his morning routine. His knight knelt and skillfully fixed his tie.

"This necktie became crooked on its own! Amazing!" Ein gasped.

"That's impossible! I believe you tied it crookedly, Sir Ein! All right, it's been fixed."

Her slender fingers securely fastened the tie around his neck.

"Huh? I don't see Dill today," Ein said.

"He's currently training. He's still a greenhorn after all."

As Chris took her hands away from the tie, Martha approached them from inside the castle.

"Pardon my intrusion, but are you all right on time? It's good to see you getting along so well with each other, but you'll be late," Martha said.

"Y-You're right!" gasped Ein.

"Sir Ein, let's hurry!" Chris said.

The two checked the time before cutting their conversation short. Ein ran ahead and Chris dashed close behind.

"I'll be off, Martha!" Ein called.

"Of course. Do take care."

It was quite clear that the castle's lively atmosphere was largely thanks to Ein. He greeted the servants and knights that dotted his path before walking out the

castle's gates. Though Chris was always forced to bring herself down to Ein's pace, she seemed to be having fun. While the knight did have a few complaints, her smile never faded.

A while later, Chris returned to the castle after dropping Ein off at school. She went to see Olivia before attending to her own duties.

"Hello, Chris."

"Good morning, Your Highness. I've just returned from sending Sir Ein to the academy."

"Thank you, as always." After enjoying a sip of her tea, Olivia set her cup on the table. "I heard that you fixed Ein's tie this morning. I feel like you're being kinder to him than before."

Olivia didn't sound doubtful but genuinely pleased that Chris had changed a bit.

"I-Is that so? I don't think I did anything special," the knight replied.

The princess chuckled, realizing that her knight wasn't even conscious of it.

"But I can't keep my eyes off him," Chris said.

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Sir Ein is just like you, Lady Olivia, but he might be even more of a troublemaker. Hence, I feel a duty to be by his side, no matter what. It's a task I can leave to no one else." Slightly blushing, Chris put her hands behind her back before gazing at the flowers in the courtyard. "And I could be by his side without being so tense."

The two went well together, both in their duties and as friends. Olivia took a sip of her tea before she spoke again.

"That's true. You're even more of a klutz around Ein."

Chris laughed. "Perhaps I'm letting my guard down a bit too much. I get anxious from time to time when I'm too relaxed."

"If you two are having fun, I don't think anyone has the right to complain."

“But, um, I’d like to be more of a cool sister figure to him...”

Olivia stared back blankly at the knight for a few moments before erupting in a fit of laughter. For Chris’s part, she could only pout in dismay.

A few hours later, it was a midsummer afternoon on the campus of the Royal Kingsland Academy. The very lake where Wolf Magnus had set his trap was now rippling in the wind, a single leaf floating on the water’s surface.

“So I told that guy that he was like a slug with muscles!” Butz said.

Ein let out a small chuckle at the redhead’s odd comparison. The two sat at the café near the water’s edge, joined by Leonardo and Loran.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Are you making fun of him?” Ein asked.

“Butz, slugs are made almost entirely from muscle. So it’s not exactly fitting to mock someone’s muscles with that analogy,” Leonardo added.

Loran chuckled. “It’s so weird that slugs were the first thing that came to your mind.”

The four friends had remained close and were also the only students to maintain their First Class status for three years in a row. Not only did they get along well from the beginning, but they cultivated a friendly rivalry that would surely become a priceless treasure in time.

“But Leonardo, slugs are so small! Even if they’re all muscle, it means something else entirely!” Butz protested.

“Y-You’re the one who started talking about muscles!”

“Jeez... You’re smart, but your conversations are always so absurd...” Loran muttered.

“Huh? Hey Ein, did Loran just make fun of me or am I imagining things?”

“Imagining? No, he just *did*.”

“H-Hey! I knew it! You’re so mean, Loran!”

Ein’s entourage also approved of his trio of friends. Dill had already graduated from the academy, leaving the prince without a guard. However, if Ein had a

group around him—especially aristocrats like Leonardo and Butz—it sent the message that he was not to be trifled with. Despite his current position as one of the castle’s knights, Dill was grateful for the trio’s presence.

Once their idle talk was over, Butz stood up.

“All right, I think I’ll go train,” he said.

It was already a little past noon.

“Right. I’ll stop by the workshop,” Loran said.

“I was thinking of going to the library for self-study. Please excuse us, Your Highness,” Leonardo said just before noticing a presence heading their way. “Someone’s coming.”

A few knights rushed over to the group.

“That uniform... They look like members of the Knights Guard. They probably have some business with Ein then,” Butz said.

“Just in case, we’ll stay here until the Knights Guard arrive,” Leonardo said. He was worried that the approaching “knights” might have simply disguised themselves in order to attack the prince.

“Right,” Loran said. The trio stood up while Ein remained seated.

“Your Highness, we have a message from Marshal Lloyd. Please excuse us for our intrusion,” a knight said as he showed his status card.

Once they confirmed that the man was one of Ishtarica’s knights, Ein’s trio of friends stepped back.

“Thank you. What’s the message?” Ein asked.

“My deepest apologies, but I hesitate to speak of it here due to the message’s sensitive nature.”

“Your Highness,” Leonardo said, glancing at Ein. “I shall be taking my leave, please excuse me.”

“Have a great day, Your Highness.”

“Um, I’ll see you tomorrow, Your Highness!”

“See you all tomorrow,” Ein said.

Once the Knights Guard confirmed that the boys had left, the knight started to speak.

“A monster capable of causing a national disaster has appeared. Dame Christina is currently en route to dispatch it and the marshal would like to speak with you on this matter.”

Ein couldn't help but wonder why Chris had left to personally face the monster. As the personal knight of the royal family and the vice captain of the Knights Guard, she was the cream of the Ishtarican crop. Ein furrowed his brows upon hearing that someone of her caliber had been sent out. *This looks bad and this knight doesn't look so hot either.*

Upon closer inspection, the members of the Knights Guard on hand didn't seem to be very composed. Sweat was forming on their brow, as if they were enduring something quite serious.

“I'll return to the castle immediately. Please escort me,” Ein said.

“Certainly, Your Highness!”

A squadron of knights was waiting outside of the academy. The knights responsible for delivering Lloyd's message and those on standby were all clad in the armor of the Knights Guard.

“Thank you for coming for me. I shall make my return to the castle,” Ein said to the knights.

His attitude was more dignified and fitting of a royal family member. He was grateful that his simple remarks could be overlooked in this unpredictable situation.

Even in a situation such as this, the water train was still the fastest mode of transportation. Ein was escorted to White Rose Station by the Knights Guard. As only the public trains were available at the time, the prince boarded a commuter train with his armored entourage. The other passengers must've been puzzled by the sight, but the intensity of the situation kept them from

asking any questions.

“The carriage,” Ein said.

“We have one prepared.”

“Over here, Your Highness.”

Waiting for him was a special carriage pulled by four horses. Much swifter than Ein’s regular carriage, this vehicle was practically reserved for the king’s use only. Upon realizing that this carriage was sent for him, Ein felt his anxiety skyrocket.

“Let us leave immediately,” Ein said, swiftly boarding the wagon and hastening its departure.

The other members of the Knights Guard rode their horses alongside the departing carriage.

Ein felt the difference in speed as the Knights Guard were riding beside him. It was an unfitting sight for the royal capital’s usually calm main street. The prince immediately thought of the conversation he’d heard the night before. Did this premonition come to pass? Considering that the message was sent by Lloyd, it implied that he was still at the castle. Ein was in need of answers and fast.

The prince stamped his feet restlessly while waiting to arrive at the castle. Though this might have been callous, Ein wouldn’t have been so worried if another knight had gone in Chris’s place. She’d been by Ein’s side for years as his knight, teacher, and now as a close friend.

“Pardon our haste! His Highness the Crown Prince has arrived!” a knight said.

The carriage stopped and no one reprimanded the Knights Guard for roughly opening the door. Even the civil servant that normally had a complaint or two could only say, “Welcome back, Your Highness! His Majesty is currently waiting in the grand conference room!”

“Got it. I’ll head there now,” Ein said, replying to the swift greeting.

The castle had broken out in a frenzy, but everyone stopped and bowed their heads to Ein once they realized he had entered the castle. However, no one displayed a hint of their usual grace and elegance—Ein was the same as he

rushed to his grandfather's location. The knights hurriedly followed the prince without a single person scolded in the process.

The panic, confusion, and loud voices of many could be felt from behind the door. Ein paid no heed to this, not even knocking as he entered the room. With his entrance, the room fell deathly silent.

"Your Majesty, I've returned," Ein said as he glanced around the conference room.

Olivia sat beside Silverd with Martha at the second princess's side.

"Indeed. I apologize for summoning you so suddenly," Silverd replied.

"Please don't be bothered. It seems that you're all in the middle of a meeting, but would you please fill me in?" Ein replied.

Ein's rarely seen serious side had appeared once again. With the prince standing firm and resolute, no one was able to challenge him; his commanding aura was unmistakably that of a royal.

"Come over here. Everyone, resume the meeting!" Silverd said before he called Ein over.

Warren and Lloyd were also at the king's side; both men sported more serious expressions than usual.

"I've received Lloyd's message; what happened? I only know that there's a monster on the loose," the prince said.

"I apologize for the sudden inconvenience," Lloyd said, stepping in front of Ein. "It's the Sea Dragon. It has appeared off the shores of Magna, but quite frankly, it's about to make landfall."

Ein raised his eyebrows, realizing that the conversation he had overheard was in relation to this very monster.

"Wh-What about Chris? Is she okay?" Ein asked, his pupils glimmering like a polished sword.

Before Lloyd could answer, Olivia choked out an answer between sobs. "Ein! Oh, Ein! Chris... Chris has..."

“Mother?! What’s wrong?!”

The speechless Olivia finally whispered out an answer in the smallest voice possible. She clung to Ein’s chest and murmured, “Chris will die.”

“Wh-What do you mean?!”

“Sir Ein, please allow me to take it from here,” Warren said. The chancellor remained as calm as possible.

Ein held his mother as she cried into his chest. After a moment, he exhaled before encouraging the chancellor to continue.

“The Sea Dragon dwarfs the *Princess Olivia*. It wields overwhelming power and extreme aggression,” Warren started.

These were not facts that needed to be spelled out for the prince. When he came face-to-face with the monster on that boat, Ein had never been gripped by such terror before. He’d fallen to the ground, his body trembling with the horror of certain death before Chris rushed him inside the ship. It was a bitter memory he’d never forget.

“I saw the Sea Dragon for myself while returning from the field trip. As such, I’m very aware of its strength and horrifying visage. Why was Chris dispatched?! She’s the vice captain of the Knights Guard! It makes no sense for her to be sent out!” Ein cried.

Warren nodded, but his expression remained grim. Ein simply couldn’t understand why *Chris* had to face the Sea Dragon. The prince knew that the other knights had their families to think of, but he was close to the vice captain; he’d formed a deep bond with her.

“Please answer me, Warren,” Ein said.

While waiting for a response, he noticed beads of sweat forming on Warren’s brow. The always composed chancellor was clearly distraught, concerning the prince further.

“An unexpected complication has arisen,” Warren started.

What could be more unexpected than the Sea Dragon? Ein gulped and waited for a reply; he was starting to sweat as well.

Mere moments later, a sentence spelled with letters of absolute despair tumbled out from Warren's mouth.

"Two...Sea Dragons have appeared."

Ein couldn't process what he had just heard. He stood frozen for a short while before he finally managed to weakly ask for a confirmation. "Th-There's...two Sea Dragons?"

"I shall be blunt. The dragons will wreak an unprecedented amount of damage to our country; perhaps the most in the nation's history. If we do not act quickly, Magna may drown in a watery grave. With that in mind, it was imperative to send a member of the high command," Warren said.

Ein finally understood what his mother was saying. No matter how skilled a person was, they couldn't possibly take on two national-disaster-scale monsters at once; the difficulty of fighting these beasts would increase exponentially.

"Then why's Lloyd here?! We still have His Majesty's ship, so let's send some more military might! Why are we sending Chris alone?!" Ein demanded.

"Sir Ein... Sir Lloyd shouldn't leave."

"Huh? Why not?!"

"Should an emergency occur, there will be no one guarding the castle. The royal family's vessel is indeed a powerful weapon, but it'll only serve as a sturdier target for the Sea Dragons."

Ein looked down and shut his mouth. Was there nothing he could do? He questioned himself—holed up in the castle while his knight was in imminent danger. As the crown prince and future of the nation, Ein was absolutely forbidden from being placed in a critically dangerous situation. However, the prince couldn't just idly watch from the sidelines.

"Ein! For Ishtarica's future, it must be Chris that defeats the monster!" Silverd said.

His decision wasn't incorrect. As the king, he'd made the wise choice.

"But I..." Ein started. He was unable to accept this situation. *Even if it's part of the royal family's duty to accept this, I...* He noticed his legs trembling ever so

slightly. The terror and dread he'd felt from being in the dragon's presence flashed across his mind. *I don't want to go. I'm scared. I can't win against that monster!*

The colossal Sea Dragon had consumed a large Kraken without issue...and *two* of them were in Ishtarica's waters. Part of him wanted to sleep and wait for the news of Chris's return. If he did that, Ein would be turning his back on his knight; a far cry from his ideals. *But...* He was scared, but he was even more terrified that she'd be gone when he woke up.

"I..." Ein murmured while looking down. He clenched his fists so hard that his nails dug into his palms.

He remembered the good times he had shared with Chris. Then his heart ached when he imagined a world where he could never speak with her again. His body was a mess: his lips were dry, his hands sweaty, and his heart thumping so hard that it echoed throughout his entire body. His eyes were squeezed shut as he tried to get a word out.

"I..."

He could hear himself clenching his hands. Ein opened his eyes wide and stared straight at his grandfather—the king's own eyes begged the boy to say not another word. Ein needed more courage than ever before to speak his following words. As he loosened his necktie, he felt Chris's hand over his. Just this morning, she'd neatly tied it for him while she looked half exhausted as always. Ein steeled himself before moving his lips.

"I'd like to go to Magna and fight the Sea Dragon."

Ein glared straight at Silverd.

"What can you do alone?! I won't allow it!" Silverd yelled.

"I know... And despite it all, I'm still asking you. I'll use the Dark Knight's powers."

"Th-Then I shall command you as your grandfather! I won't allow you to put yourself in such a dangerous situation! This is a wholly different situation from the Magnus incident!"

“He’s right. You’re the crown prince... I wouldn’t even want to imagine the worst that could happen. Your body is no longer yours alone, Sir Ein!” Warren added, trying to calm the boy down.

Ein’s actions were surely unfitting of a royal, but he refused to stop. “The first king would never silently hide in the castle. I want to fight the Sea Dragon, just as our first king faced the Demon Lord.”

“Sir Ein, I shall prevent you from going to Magna, no matter what,” Lloyd said.

“Lloyd, I can’t just sit back here and wait. Your Majesty—grandfather! Please allow me to go!”

“You fool! Don’t make me repeat myself!” Silverd roared.

Should Ein head to Magna, he wouldn’t return unscathed. The king had no intention of sending his grandson into a death trap.

“No! You can’t go to such a dangerous place!” Olivia shrieked as tears ran down her face. Ein’s heart twinged with pain.

“Even your own mother is begging you. Ein, will you continue to insist on this nonsense? Even though you’re the crown prince?!” Silverd said, his royal pressure emanating from him.

Those words struck Ein’s heart as if he were surrounded by a tempest of sharp winds. “Yes! I can’t allow Chris to go alone!”

“I see. Very well, Ein, I understand.”

The reply was like a ray of hope. Ein was ecstatic, thinking he’d gotten through to his grandfather. As a smile was about to form on his face, Silverd gave an order.

“I suppose it’s useless to stop you. Lloyd, I’m sorry to saddle you with this unpleasant task.”

Ein felt his consciousness fade. Behind him was Lloyd, who had sadly jabbed the boy.

“This is my job. Please don’t mind me,” the marshal replied.

“Father? How could you do that to Ein?!” Olivia cried.

“If I didn’t, he would have taken the first train to Magna!” Silverd asserted.

“I didn’t know that you’d resort to violence!” Olivia’s sadness turned to anger as she glared at her father. She put Ein over her lap and wrapped her arms around him, shielding the boy from the others. The other people in the room were startled by this unexpected display of force.

“Martha, come here,” Silverd said.

“Your wish is my command,” she replied, though she was unable to hide her shock.

“Take Olivia to her room. She mustn’t leave without my permission! And Lloyd, take Ein to Katima!”

Several minutes later, Ein opened his eyes and found himself in Katima’s underground research facility.

“Are mew awake?”

“Huh? Wh-Why am I...” Ein muttered. Feeling a throbbing pain in the back of his skull, he realized what had happened. “Jeez, I didn’t think he’d use force.”

“That’s only natural. Anyways, how are you feline?”

“Physically? I’m fine. Emotionally? I feel awful.”

“Hm. I’d say that’s the right way to be feline at the meowment.”

Ein got up. “Huh? I’m not in my academy uniform.” The boy was now in the royal attire he wore around the castle. “Did someone change my clothes?”

“I did—kidding! It was Martha. Hey, don’t go pointing those skeptical eyes my way!”

Ein sighed. “It’s just a little embarrassing to have my clothes changed while I’m out cold.”

“Don’t mew worry about it. Thanks to Martha’s deft paws, she was done in a few seconds.”

Ein was slightly curious about the servant’s sleight of hand, but his surroundings quickly snatched his attention. He sighed loudly as he surveyed

the room from a sofa. While it was quite a comfy piece of furniture, the prince left the sofa and made his way to the door. He proceeded to grasp the doorknob and turn it.

“Just in case it’s worth asking, you don’t plan to let me go, do you?” Ein had a dry smile on his face as he tried to open the door to no avail.

“Nope, and even if I did... It’s locked fur-om outside. Mew can’t leave.”

“Ah, I see. So does that mean that I’m out of options?”

“There’s one way. You could kill me-ow and trick someone into opening the door. From there, mew could leave the room, sneak out of the castle, and head furr the station.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

He was pretty much locked in without any plan of escape. Hurting Katima wouldn’t be part of any plan he’d try to work out.

“Wait right there... I’ve got an idea. I can use the Dark Knight’s powers to bust my way out of here.”

“Impawsible.” It wouldn’t be a problem for him under most circumstances, but today wasn’t “most circumstances.” Katima continued, “You’re not using any magic while in this room. I didn’t think he’d go this far, but father’s had a purrfectly designed seal prepared for this express purpose.”

“He was *too prepared* for this.”

“Only someone strong as the Demon Lord himself could bust out of this stronghold.”

Out of options, Ein had questions like “*is there truly nothing I can do?*” and “*is it all over?*” running through his head. He felt like he’d lose it if simply waited for Chris’s return.

“What would you suggest, Aunt Katima?”

“To sit still and wait. Pray furr Chris to come back home safely.”

“Pray to the Gods, huh?”

It’d been a while since Ein had used the word “God.” He hadn’t thought about

his encounter with God in the void until just now. The memories of their chance meeting flashed in his head.

“God... The God that looks like a little girl... Please share some of your knowledge with me,” he prayed, not expecting anything to happen.

The princess had no idea whom her nephew was praying to, but it made him feel a little better regardless.

“What’s with that prayer? Mew aren’t being furr real, are you?” Katima sighed at Ein’s seemingly nonsensical plea.

“This is fine. I’m sure she’ll understand,” Ein replied.

“I have no clue what mew’re on about, but keep doing what mew need to do.”

“I will.”

The prince continued to pray. *What’s she up to this time? Is she still wearing light clothing? She might catch a cold in that! She might just go crazy walking around in that white void... Or maybe she lost her marbles long ago.* Ein’s mind was filled with more than a few disrespectful observations.

Suddenly, something odd occurred.

“H-Huh? Aunt Katima?”

The first princess unnaturally froze in place mid-stride. Upon closer inspection, Ein noticed that time was moving at a snail’s pace. Kind of like a broken television set with speakers blown out, Ein’s surroundings flickered from color into a monochrome world of silence. The prince was able to freely move, causing him to realize that *he* had changed.

“This...”

He didn’t have a clue as to what was happening, but was sure it was some sort of magic. Ein initially thought it might have been an effect of Silverd’s seal, but wondered why it didn’t affect him. He looked around in panic before he was struck by a head-splitting pain and the mysterious voice that accompanied it.

“Take a good look around the room, you fool.”

He instantly recognized whose voice this was—she'd sent him to this world from the void.

"Huh?!"

Immediately after the headache passed, Ein smiled at the voice in his head. Color returned to the world, and life resumed as if nothing had happened.

"Ha ha ha... Thank you, God," the prince murmured.

"Hm? Did mew say something?"

"No, nothing to you, Aunt Katima."

"Talking to yourself, hm?"

He couldn't tell if the voice was real or a hallucination, but Ein knew that he'd been given a hint. He'd been told to take a good look around the room, implying that the key was within the room alongside him.

"If you've got time for a weird prayer, do mew have a moment to lend me a paw?"

"Lend you a paw with what?"

"Can't mew tell? I purrrchased a book the other day, didn't I? We have some valuable information to look for!"

Katima was more tense than usual; she must've been worried about Chris as well. *I'm sorry, Aunt Katima. I'm sorry for acting recklessly— Wait! That's it!* While apologizing for his actions, Ein had found what he was looking for.

Thanks to God's advice, Ein had found his answer.

"Thank you, God. I guess you really are still looking over me."

"E-Ein? What are mew on about?" Katima looked at Ein with worry, thinking he might've lost it.

"Nothing. I'll help out, but just give me a moment,"

"M-Meow...all right then..."

The prince then proceeded to approach his solution, the cursed magic stone.

"This thing's really mysterious, isn't it?" he said.

“Right mew are. I think this is the key, but I can’t read it at all!”

Ein had managed to calm himself, while Katima breathed a sigh of relief after plopping herself down on the sofa. As the prince gazed at the stone, the princess looked away for a brief moment.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Katima.”

“Hm? Furr what?” Katima said. Her head was in a book as she nonchalantly responded to Ein’s apology.

“I don’t care if it’s cursed. I need this stone’s power!”

He used that brief moment to reach out and firmly grasped the cursed stone.

“I-I can feel it!” he said.

Like in his last encounter with the stone, a pulsating Phantom Hand emerged from his back, a tendril more powerful than any he’d ever summoned before.

“H-How can mew use your Phantom Hands?! Stop it right meow!”

The Cait-Sìth hastily leaped to her feet in an attempt to tackle the prince. However, things didn’t play out like last time.

“*Don’t move,*” a woman’s voice bellowed, reverberating throughout the room. Unlike his last encounter with the stone, the presence within had definitively proved her existence.

Katima’s entire body had been paralyzed. Aside from breathing, she couldn’t lift a finger.

“Wh-Why can’t I mewve?! Ein! What did mew do?!”

While the anxious princess was becoming even more panicked, Ein found himself surrounded by a warm, gentle aura. Reminded of his mother, the boy was tempted to give himself over to the sensation. *I can’t even taste this stone.* Despite its lack of taste, he felt himself overcome with a sense of warmth as he continued to absorb the cursed rock. Like a child eagerly sucking down a juice box, Ein continued to draw every possible drop of power from the stone.

“Y-You’re absorbing it, aren’t mew?! It’s clawfully dangerous! Stop!”

“That’s why I apologized to you earlier, Aunt Katima.”

He ignored his aunt's words and absorbed the cursed stone until it had lost its color. With the rock now transparent, the voice imparted her final words to the boy.

"Thank you... Welcome home."

Ein couldn't suppress a smile after hearing the woman's pleasant voice—a voice that sounded much kinder than before. While he silently placed the stone on the table, Ein was puzzled as to how he could control his new abilities. It was as if the power flowing from his body had magically filled him in.

"I'm done."

"‘I'm done,’ my tail!" Still paralyzed, Katima struggled to even eke a word out.

"Right, sorry. Here you are. Are you all right?"

"M-Mroooow?! I can mewve! What did you do?!"

"I don't really know myself, but I think I have a grasp on my powers. You should be fine, Aunt Katima. With that, I'll take my leave."

Ein raised his hand and the sounds of shattering glass echoed throughout the room. Katima was alarmed by the noise, but soon understood what the prince had done when he casually opened the door.

"Did mew break the seal?"

"I'm sorry. I'll make sure to pay for it when I return."

"But how did mew break it? And how will you compensate me-ow?!"

"A monster that appears once every few centuries must be rare, right? So I'll bring home some of their materials to pay you back. Wait for me, okay?"

The knights fell to the ground upon witnessing Ein's exit. Who could blame them? Katima did mention that only one of the Demon Lord's caliber could break the seal.

"Y-Your Highness?!"

"How did you escape?!"

"Thank you for standing guard. I'll be out for a bit," Ein replied to the soldiers.

Katima couldn't process this situation. How did Ein destroy the seal? Just what was that magic stone he absorbed?

Ein spoke to himself in hopes of lightening his mood. "All right, and we're off to Magna."

"Huff... Huff... Pardon my intrusion, but it's an emergency! Is Marshal Lloyd present?!" a knight panted.

Standing next to Silverd, Lloyd replied, "What's wrong?"

"H-His Highness! His Highness has escaped from the underground research facility! He's currently headed outside!"

"Katima must've lent him a hand," Silverd muttered.

"Your Majesty, I believe that even Princess Katima would have difficulty breaking Majorica's special seal from the inside," Warren said, trying to dissuade the king from his sorrow. Even the chancellor could only look at Lloyd with bewilderment.

"However he did it, we can ask that later. Your Majesty, I shall leave to stop Sir Ein," Lloyd said. The marshal had maintained his composure in the face of this unforeseen situation.

"I'll leave it to you," Silverd said, looking relieved. As Lloyd had said, they could figure it out later. "I don't care if you use the Knights Guard to do it, but stop him at all costs."

"Yes, Your Majesty! Your wish is my command."

Even Lloyd would struggle in a tussle with the powered-up Ein. Fully aware of this, the marshal took hold of a bladeless sword that decorated the conference room.

"Please allow me to borrow this," he said.

"Go ahead. I shall overlook this if you bring him back with few injuries," Silverd replied.

Even though he'd just escaped Katima's lab, Ein realized that his aunt was walking alongside him.

"Mrow. I did what I could, so I guess my part is over. I'm gonna take a catnap."

"You're not going to stop me?"

"We're way beyond that point, my furrrend. Meow, I can only pray for your safety."

"Sorry to worry you."

"Mew really do. Yeesh..." While they exchanged some playful banter, it was clear that she was concerned for his well-being. "Anyways, this is where we go our sepurrrrate ways. If mew don't come back safe, I'll never forgive you!"

With nimble steps, Katima suddenly ran off. Though she could've stayed by his side for a bit longer, something had caught her eye and she headed to her room.

"That was sudden..." Ein muttered before he quickly noticed why she had left.

Just past the basement staircase, there was a lady standing to the side of a corridor that led to the great hall. She had her back turned.

"Good day, Ein. I haven't seen you since yesterday," she said.

Krone August had grown into a beautiful woman over the past few years. Her similarly beautiful voice stopped Ein in his tracks when her pleasant tones reached his ears.

"Yeah, same here. I'm happy that I ran into you," he said.

"Heh heh, it's a great honor to hear that from the crown prince himself. Would you care to join me for a cup of tea? In my room perhaps?"

Even amongst Liebe's large student body, the highly popular Krone was considered to be the spitting image of the second princess herself. Every day, droves of men would become infatuated with her as she walked to school from the station. There were even a few times when would-be suitors randomly proposed to her on the street. These men wanted to form some sort of bond with this beautiful and highly educated lady, but that would never happen. One

might ask why that was the case, but it was obvious that her heart belonged to Ein.

“It’s so nerve-racking to be sipping tea alone with someone as gorgeous as you, Krone,” he said.

“My my, you’re making me blush. Shall we get going then?”

This bit of nonsensical back-and-forth was a result of Krone’s own nerves. She desperately tried to hide her feelings and remain composed in the prince’s presence.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I have to decline the invite. I have a prior engagement to attend to,” Ein replied.

“Oh, you’re horrible. I had to muster up all of my courage to invite you.”

“It’s not a big deal; I just have a big fish to fry. I’ll grab some delicious seafood on my way home from Magna, so why don’t we make a huge feast out of it tonight?”

Ein wouldn’t accept any of her invitations, so Krone whipped out some tricks from her playbook: playing with her hair, meekly hanging her head, and a few other things. However, the prince wasn’t going to budge an inch.

“So you’re really going,” Krone said.

“Yeah,” Ein replied.

“Even though I’m trying this hard to stop you?”

“Yeah.”

Ein stood firm and resolute.

“What if I said you could do anything you’d like to me?” she asked.

“You made my heart flutter for a second there, but I still have to go.”

The two exchanged a smile. Krone hugged Ein tightly before swiftly releasing him from her embrace. She bent her hips and looked up at him.

“You’ve made your decision, haven’t you? Perhaps it was a bit boorish of a lady to plead for you to stay.”

Ein was reluctant to leave her side after hearing those words, but he gave his answer: “Not at all. I’m happy that you’re so worried about me. So please, wait just a little while.”

“But that ‘little’ feels quite long,” Krone said with a giggle, causing his heart to pound loudly. “Goodness, you’ve always been stubborn, haven’t you?”

She stepped to the side and allowed him to pass.

“Thank you. I really love this part of you,” Ein said.

“Hmmm, but you won’t say you love me, will you?”

“H-Ha ha ha... Um, let’s leave that matter for another time.”

He was so embarrassed that he couldn’t say how he truly felt about her. While that did make Krone feel a tad impatient, she let it slide; this was a very “Ein” thing to do.

“You know, saying how you really feel in times like these make certain women very happy. I hope you keep that in mind,” she said.

“I have and I’ll do just that the next time around.”

He was glad that he was able to speak with her before he left. Ein was more determined than ever before and gave Krone a firm nod, knowing that he could pull out all the stops in Magna. At the moment he walked past her, Krone quickly leaned in and pecked the prince on the cheek.

“Here’s a blessing from a goddess, for luck,” she said.

Ein’s cheeks grew warm—the boy was flabbergasted by the soft and warm sensation that graced him.

“I feel like I could win only on the back of that blessing, but aren’t you going to give me a proper kiss?” he asked.

“I’m just copying you, after all. You said it yourself, ‘next time.’”

“I see. Now I know how to use someone’s work against them. I’ll be off!”

Ein ran past her. Krone wanted him to concentrate during the battle, opting not to shed a single tear—she desired to give him a strong send-off. However, huge tears trickled down her cheeks once the prince was out of sight. She

wiped her cheeks with her index finger before she clasped her hands together and offered a prayer to God. She prayed with everything she could, wishing for Ein's safe return.



Ein made his way to the great hall, planning to bust open the doors and rush to White Rose Station. He knew that this plan wouldn't be smooth sailing from here on out. In fact, he crossed paths with an obstacle waiting for him in the great hall; the prince had been expecting this.

"Why, if it isn't Sir Ein! Good day!" a man said.

"I knew you'd be here, Lloyd."

The Knights Guard stood in front of the exit with Lloyd standing just a few steps in front of the battalion.

"Isn't the weather lovely today!" Lloyd said. "And where are you headed to in such a hurry?"

Ein grew tense as he was now face-to-face with Ishtarica's strongest man— Marshal Lloyd Gracier. Though he knew he didn't stand a chance against the mighty man, the prince knew he couldn't falter here.

"It's such a beautiful day, so I thought I'd take a breather outside. Care to join me?" Ein replied.

"Hm, that's a wonderful invitation, but I have a few duties to carry out."

"That's a pity. I guess I'll head off by myself while I have the chance."

"That won't do. You'd need guards, of course. Now where are you planning to go on such a lovely day?"

The moment those words came from Lloyd's mouth, the atmosphere around him changed instantly. Ein thought he heard the sound of glass windows shattering while other panes of glass continued to quiver. The marshal's intense aura was incomparable to anything Ein had faced before. From the sweat forming on the brows of his men, one could wager that they were intimidated as well.

"I wanted to go see the ocean and thought I'd grab some seafood while I was at it," Ein said.

"I see. You're a splendid boy, indeed. Gives me all the more reason to keep Ishtarica's treasure from heading into the jaws of death."

Lloyd praised Ein for being unfazed by his aura. The moment the marshal finished speaking, the prince took a large step forward.

“I am going to Magna!” Ein declared.

Had the boy been a second late, he would’ve surely been done in by Lloyd. However, the prince managed to exert his newfound power in the nick of time.

“Hm! Wh-What is this?” Lloyd said.

Just as he had with Katima, Ein used his new ability to restrain Lloyd and the Knights Guard. The prince had no idea what he was doing or how it even worked, but he seemed to have some kind of instinctual grasp behind it.

“You’ve broken the seal and have frozen us in place. Seems like you’ve had a bit of a growth spurt, Sir Ein.”

“You’re sounding lively. It was a struggle for Katima to even talk.”

“Well, I *am* a marshal. However, it’s a bit difficult for me to freely move.” Lloyd broke a sweat while overexerting himself in hopes of moving, but his body wasn’t listening to any of his demands. Despite struggling, the marshal’s sharp gaze gave Ein the impression that the mountain of a man could crash down on him at any moment.

“I’ll be taking my leave while you’re stuck there,” Ein said, swiftly walking ahead as though he were fleeing.

As Ein passed by Lloyd and the Knights Guard members, he heard a booming voice echoing out from behind him.

“The victor is always correct. The loser has no right to complain, but know that your current actions are of your own volition. Please do not forget that you shoulder various responsibilities,” Lloyd said, swiftly admitting defeat.

Ein was curious about the marshal’s true intentions, but he quickly pushed open the door and ran while he could. Full speed ahead, the prince rushed to White Rose Station.

A few minutes after Ein had left, Lloyd muttered, “He really does exceed expectations.”

Lloyd and the Knights Guard were still stuck in the grand hall, completely paralyzed. The marshal was pondering his future course of action when a shocked Warren entered the room.

“I haven’t the faintest clue as to what has occurred, but I understand that Sir Ein has escaped. It’s quite apparent that our crown prince makes trouble on a much larger scale than even Lady Olivia,” the chancellor said.

“Quite right, Sir Warren. Now then... Hmph!” Lloyd flexed his body and the sound of something snapping echoed in the air. With that, the marshal was able to move freely once more.

“Oh? Were you acting?”

“I’d love to say I was, but he had taken me by complete surprise, unfortunately. I’m most likely able to break free because Sir Ein is long gone.”

“Hm, then do you understand what kind of enchantment you were under?”

“I believe it was some kind of binding spell. I never expected him to use such high-class magic. Binding spells can be easily repelled with the right equipment, which we didn’t have.”

Armor made from the remains of certain monsters are capable of countering binding magic, but the Knights Guard were caught off guard in their standard-issue armor.

“Shall I lend you a hand?” Warren offered.

“Thank you. I hate to admit it, but yes, please do.”

Now outside the grand hall, Ein made his way to the castle gates. Without a carriage at his disposal, the prince was forced to travel by foot.

“Damn it! This castle’s stupidly large! I know I live here, but this is ridiculous!” Ein complained.

White Rose wasn’t small either. Ein grumbled upon realizing he’d have a long walk ahead of him. As he reached the castle gates, he noticed that someone was waiting for him.

“Sir Ein, I didn’t think you’d come all this way. How did you break through my father’s defenses?” a young man asked.

“Dill...”

After he graduated from the Royal Academy, Dill had become tasked with protecting Ein. The two were much closer than they had been in the past, almost incomparably so. While Dill was still a rookie knight, the power he wielded was enough for the rest of the castle to take him seriously as the crown prince’s bodyguard.

“You can’t stop me. I’m going to Magna,” Ein said.

The horse-mounted Dill made no attempts to stop his prince. “You must be misunderstanding something... I’m here to accompany you. Please use this horse for your travels.”

Ein looked to be stunned while Dill was calling for another horse to come out from under the shadows.

“I-I thought you came to stop me!” the prince said in astonishment.

“I do serve Ishtarica, but above all...I serve you, Sir Ein.”

“Wait! But if you help me, you’ll—”

“Since we’re in this situation, please allow me to crack a joke or two. If I do get fired, I’d be grateful if you hired me back on as your personal knight.”

With a smile on his face, Dill encouraged Ein to get a move on. Heartened by the support of his knight, the prince was confident he’d make it to the station at a breakneck speed.

“Of course I’d hire you!” Ein said. “I’m so grateful that I’ll make you the captain if I ever get my own legion of knights!”

Unexpectedly receiving a horse was a stroke of good luck. Ein was able to arrive at the station far more quickly than he’d anticipated. Ein and Dill dismounted their horses, but the hubbub around the station had turned into dead silence—all eyes were on the pair.

“Leave the horses here! Let’s rush inside!” Dill said.

“Right!”

They tied off their horses to the royals’ usual hitching post and attempted to board the train.

“My goodness! Whatever’s the matter, Your Highness?” a voice said.

Majorica had just hopped off the train to find a ghastly-looking Ein standing before him.

“Sorry, Majorica! I’ve got some urgent business to attend to in Magna!” Ein replied.

“The port city? At this very moment? Your Highness, you’re not planning on...”

As a frequent visitor to the castle, Majorica was surely aware of the current ongoing events in Magna. After figuring out why the boys were in such a hurry, the man scrambled to dig something out of his pocket.

“Your Highness! Take this!” he said, throwing a cloth bag to the prince.

A clatter could be heard from within the bag.

“I’ll invoice the castle, so don’t worry about it! They’re fresh Healbird stones!” Majorica called out.

As implied by its name, a Healbird’s stone could heal one’s injuries. It was the only parting gift that Majorica could whip up at the moment.

“Thank you, Majorica!” Ein called out.

“Of course. Good luck!”

Ein continued rushing to the trains; he was looking to hop on the royal family’s train. He’d normally need to go through a steward, but Ein wasn’t sure how quickly he could get the train moving.

“Sir Ein, if I may say something,” Dill said as the pair ran through the station.

“Y-Yes?”

“The fastest way to get there is by the royal family’s water train, but it’ll take a while to get it moving!”

“Yeah, I was just thinking about that!”

“There is one way to avoid this all.”

“Huh?!”

Thinking he was a lifesaver, Ein continued to look at Dill’s face.

“You can use a royal edict. It’s an absolute order that only a member of the royal family can issue. However, if your usage is deemed inappropriate...you may be exiled from the royal family!”

Dill continued to mention that exile was the worst-case scenario, but abuse of this power always came at a great risk—exile was almost always guaranteed. Despite his status as the crown prince, Ein had disobeyed the king and he’d be using this sacred privilege to rush headfirst into danger. The prince smiled.

“But I can move the water train, right?” he asked.

“You can. I know I shouldn’t be saying this after accompanying you all this way, but I cannot allow you an edict! I’m sure you can understand why.”

“Dill.”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

Ein thanked Dill from the bottom of his heart before shifting his gaze to the royal’s water train.

“Continue guarding me. We’ll go to Magna as planned!” Ein declared.

Dill knew that this would happen from the start, but he’d still made an effort to dissuade the prince with some sage advice. Now that his master had his heart set on this goal, the knight would do all he could to grant Ein’s wishes.

“Your wish is my command, Sir Ein.”

White Rose continued bustling as the stationmaster found himself unable to disobey a royal edict. Silverd soon caught wind that the train had left the station and he used a communication device to command the train to stop. However, the device’s message would never be received, as though someone had jammed the radio waves.

The train’s furnace was pushed above and beyond its intended limits. It would

get the boys to Magna, but the furnace would need to be replaced if it ever hoped to run again.

Several minutes had passed since their departure, and Ein asked, “How are Chris’s odds against the dragons?”

“If it was against just one, I’d say she might be able to handle it. The Sea Dragon makes quite a mess, but we’ve been preparing for that. You could even say that the Ishtarican Armada was formed for this very day,” Dill replied.

However, there were two Sea Dragons to contend with this time.

“I don’t want you to muddy the waters, so give it to me straight. There’s a high chance we’re all doomed, right?” Ein asked.

Dill silently nodded.

“I knew it. Now then...” Ein had to think of a plan. How could he defeat a Sea Dragon? He not only had to get there, but the monster dwarfed the *Princess Olivia* and he was just a young child.

Ein was more focused on finding a path to victory than cowering in fear. Perhaps he’d become a touch defiant; he was no longer shaking as he had been before and had collected himself enough to think of a cunning ploy.

“How will you fight it? I’m sure the Dark Knight could take care of the beast, but you’re not the Dullahan, Sir Ein,” Dill said.

While the Dark Knight was powerful, Ein couldn’t strike the same kind of fatal blow, just as Dill had pointed out. *How can I fight this? I can’t wing it or be underprepared. There has to be something that only I can do...* One idea came to mind. Ein gasped and looked up when he realized what he was going to do. He shoved his hand in his chest pocket and breathed a sigh of relief when he found what he was looking for.

“Dill! Where’s the Sea Dragon’s magic stone?” Ein asked.

“I believe it’s inside its forehead,” Dill replied with a befuddled look on his face.

“Then I have a plan!”

“Sir Ein, why did you ask about the stone?”

The prince didn't answer and instead posed another question. "What should we do about the ship, Dill?"

His guard sighed. "I understand. A ship? You'd like a ship, correct?"

"Ha ha ha. Thank you. You're a huge help."

Dill appeared to be slightly exhausted, but Ein smiled after being reassured by the friend who pledged to protect him.

"We can use our—the Graciers' ship. That's the only thing I can think of," Dill replied.

"Thank you. If you weren't by my side, I wouldn't know what to do."

"Indeed, but please tell me one last thing. If you plan to throw your life away, I must stop you here and now. You don't intend to, correct?"

This was Dill's final request for confirmation. He wanted to grant his master's wishes, but Dill would have stopped everything if the prince claimed he was going on a suicide mission. It didn't matter how far they'd come, this guard would never allow the prince to meet his end.

"Don't worry, I have no plans to kick the bucket. I'll slay the Sea Dragon and return home to be showered in my mother's praises!" Ein replied.

Dill looked slightly relieved to see Ein think of his mother in such a dire situation. The guard had no idea what the prince would do, but was now convinced that Ein didn't plan to keel over.

Not far off the coast of Magna, Chris was leading an elite unit of warriors and adventurers in a battle against the Sea Dragon. Though these adventurers of this stalwart unit outclassed any force Heim could assemble, the group was composed of many reluctant participants.

Keenly aware of the Sea Dragon's terrible might, the unit also had a clear disadvantage: their battlefield was the colossus's home turf. Signing up for a battle at sea such as this was akin to a death wish. Yet, many adventurers had answered their country's call to join in the conflict and mitigate damage in the city where possible.

A few boats had already capsized, taking countless lives along with them. Had this been a proper war, this would have been considered a catastrophic loss. However, many believed that these sacrifices were necessary in order to prevail.

“Commander! The Sea Dragon has dived and now is watching us from below!”

“There’s no need to report casualties! Come on and make haste! Hurry up, damn it!”

“Lay down an oil slick and set it ablaze! It’s hurting our ocean, but it’s a sacrifice we have to make!”

The Sea Dragon detested fire. No one was sure if it was the beast’s weakness or if they just didn’t like it, but past battles had imparted this pearl of wisdom to the adventurers. The burning stretch of water was intended to lure in the Sea Dragon for an easily launched attack. It was the best plan they had. While serving as commander for the mission, Chris was feeling a little relieved to know that their plan had been going smoothly so far.

“We were able to deal a sizable blow to one of the dragons, but the other one’s practically unharmed,” she murmured.

Thanks to a well-timed spell, one of the dragons lost an eye and had its fin torn. However, the other one was hardly scratched if at all.

“We’re fine. We still have more than half of our force left!” she said.

The unit’s victory against one of the beasts had been guaranteed, but the thought of fighting another one had Chris ready to throw in the towel.

“Commander! One of the dragons is surfacing!”

“Prepare for attack!” she ordered.

Should the dragon tackle or bite the keel of the ship, it would be greeted by a volley of shocking magical tools. The remaining adventurers lined up their shots as the monster slowly surfaced.

“Hurry! We need to take out one of them at the very least!”

Before the Sea Dragon could attack the ship, the unit had to strike one of its weaknesses: the eyes, the throat, or the magic stone embedded in its forehead.

The unit could land a crippling blow if they launched a coordinated attack on the same weak spot, but that was unlikely with their remaining manpower. With that in mind, it was imperative that the force's attacks were synchronized and their aim was true.

"Artillery, aim for the throat! Sorcerers and archers will aim for the stone!" Chris commanded.

If the Sea Dragon failed to crumple and continued on the warpath, Chris and her men were prepared to follow up with a volley of spears.

"RAAAAAH!"

The partially blinded Sea Dragon let out a deafening roar as it emerged from the ocean. As it was probably on the verge of death, the beast gathered everything it had left to let out an intense pressure before tackling the ship.

"That one's about to die! Don't let up!"

"Come on! Keep hammering it!"

The dragon's final act had struck fear into the hearts of the brave cabal of warriors—knights and adventurers who regularly walked the tightrope of life and death.

As though it were about to meet its end, the dragon let out an earsplitting howl as it continued to charge. Chris's men continued their desperate attacks, praying that the beast would fall.

Moments later, the exhausted and gravely injured Sea Dragon let out a startled cry. While it was trying to protect its throat from artillery strikes, the dragon had failed to notice the storm of magic and arrows aimed for its forehead.

The monster's death cry was reminiscent of ice crackling on a winter's day—a sound that bore good tidings. Cheers started to erupt from the fleet.

"We did it... We really did it! We shattered its magic stone!"

"Hell yeah! Take that, you dumb snake!"

"We've got one left! We can do this if we keep it up!"

The cracked magic stone leaked its essence into the water as the Sea Dragon convulsed. That hopeful enthusiasm had rubbed off on Chris, who now believed that she could even slay the second beast. However, those cheers soon turned into shocked screaming.

“H-Hey, what’s it doing?!”

“D-Did that Sea Dragon just jump?!”

One could see the dragon’s almost translucent stone as it sank into the ocean, but it then jumped into the air like a dolphin. This sight was news to Chris.

“Wait! It’s going to land on—” she started.

Had the dragon simply jumped, her boys only needed to worry about the ocean spray and swaying of the waves. However, it was about to land on a trio of warships.

“H-Hey!”

“S-Stop! Stop!”

Screams could be heard coming from the warships in the distance, but those poor souls could only wait for the dragon to crush them. The screaming turned into shrieking and howling as the dragon landed. The crumpling warships demonstrated that the Sea Dragon’s large physique wasn’t just for show.

“How could this be...”

A Sea Dragon had never leaped into the air before. Was this a coincidence, or had the monsters evolved just as Ishtarica’s technology had?

“Commander! The second one’s emerging!”

The unit was still in shock from what they had just seen, but the practically unscathed Sea Dragon emerged from the depths. Astounded by the colossi’s strategic movements, the word “surrender” flashed across Chris’s mind.

“We’ll launch the same attack again! Prepare yourselves!” she ordered.

Though she was taken off guard, Chris wasn’t going to stand around and do nothing. If she employed the same plan of attack on this second dragon, the knight could buy her men some time. Unfortunately, that crushing leap had also

extinguished the burning oil slicks on the water's surface. The remaining dragon triumphantly glided through the water as it attacked the warships in Chris's vicinity.

"Hey, you've gotta be kidding me!"

"Run! Please! I'm begging you!"

Chris heard screaming echo around her as the vigorous monster mercilessly capsized another ship. The balance of power was broken. She'd managed to barely maintain a united front against the dragon, but they were now running out of manpower.

"It's coming this way! Hurry and brace yourselves!" Chris courageously shouted. Despite being in a hopeless situation, the knight desperately tried to hide her trembling hands. The dragon slipped back under the water's surface, closing the distance while dodging the magic and arrows that pelted it from above.

This beast had most likely realized that its deceased comrade had created the perfect window of opportunity. With its prey worn down, the dragon planned to slam its body into Chris's warship upon surfacing.

Jeez... I wanted to see the forest by my hometown one last time before I go... I made Lady Olivia cry...and I didn't say goodbye to Sir Ein, Chris thought to herself. Despite that, she refused to let her knights see that she'd resigned herself to this fate. From within her armor, Chris took out the necklace she had received from Ein—a treasured gift filled with precious memories.

Sir Ein, I would've liked to hear your voice one last time. Please continue to live a happy life alongside Lady Olivia and Lady Krone. She couldn't push the joyous days and small talk that she'd shared with Ein from her mind. The knight donned her helmet, hiding the tears running down her face from the view of any comrades.

"We'll give it our all right here! Hit that creature with the strongest final blow we can muster! We mustn't allow it to approach our land, the resting place of our first king's soul!" she commanded.

Upon hearing her bold rallying cry, the rest of the unit loudly roared in

agreement. They wouldn't die for naught. Even if they couldn't slay this Sea Dragon, they'd gouge out another eye at the very least. As the unit prepared to trade blows, the emerging Sea Dragon took aim and Chris boldly faced it down.

Just as they steeled their resolve...

"Huh? Fog?"

A thick fog covered the surface of the ocean. It only seemed to surround the area around the Sea Dragon, causing the beast to screech in confusion. The dense, white mist emanated an odd, sweet aroma. Chris and many of the adventurers on board were familiar with this fog. It was the scent of a creature that had no business appearing in the middle of the ocean—a plant monster that tricked adventurers who wandered too deep into the forest.

"A-A ship?"

Amidst the haze, a single vessel approached Chris from the opposite side of the Sea Dragon. Shortly after she noticed it, a loud rumble rang in the air as a cannon was fired at the monster. With the beast distracted, Chris used her wind magic to listen in on the ship that had silently and suddenly glided onto the battlefield.

"Sir Ein! What's with this fog?! You must fill me in on these things beforehand!"

"R-Right, sorry... But, uh...the Sea Dragon's looking right at us. Sorry!"

The voices she heard didn't quite fit the situation they were in; it would surely make everyone slump their shoulders.

"Shouldn't we continue our attack from within the fog, Sir Ein?" Dill asked.

"No, that's probably not possible. It could dive and avoid everything. In any case, it looks like that was a close call."

The watery battlefield was filled with its fair share of despair. It even raised the hair on the back of Ein's neck when he stopped to think what would have happened if he hadn't intervened.

"Indeed. Ah, it seems like the Sea Dragon has fled for the moment," Dill said.

“Then let’s keep moving forward while we still can.”

“Shall we take up position in front of Dame Chris’s ship?”

“We shall. While I’m fighting the dragon, could you protect the ship for me?”

“Ha ha... I find it funny that a guard merely needs to protect a boat.”

Dill immediately gave orders to the crew, who moved the ship next to Chris’s boat. The Graciers’ prized attack vessel was loaded with a varied arsenal of weaponry at its keel. Perhaps cautious of the fog that permeated the battlefield, the Sea Dragon had dived deep underwater.

The ship’s furnace was churning at full capacity as the boat approached Chris’s warship. Ein and Chris were now close enough to shout at one another.

“S-Sir Ein! Why are you here?!” Chris cried.

“Oh hey Chris. I haven’t seen you since this morning. I heard you were having a rough go of it out here, so I decided to give you a hand,” Ein replied.

Chris and the rest of her unit stood flabbergasted upon hearing the prince’s words. They struggled to even squeak out a response.

“Why... Why did you come?! Didn’t His Majesty, Lady Olivia, and Sir Lloyd try to stop you?!” she asked.

“Of course they did, but I fought my way out here!”

Chris had no idea how Ein had arrived, but she wasn’t thinking about that. She was more concerned with the crown prince being by her side.

“You must return to the capital—” Chris started.

“You’re not going to tell me to turn back, are you? You know very well that it’s too late for that!”

The knight was well aware, but she wanted the prince to run to safety—even if his chances of doing so were slim.

“You may have a plethora of wonderful skills, Sir Ein, but you don’t stand a chance against the Sea Dragon!”

In a contest of brute strength, the Dullahan would win against the Sea Dragon every time. However, it was a different story if their battlefield was a watery

one. Another key detail was that while Ein might have had his skill, the prince was nowhere near as strong as the Dark Knight himself.

“We’re out of time, Sir Ein!” Dill reported while staring at the water.

“Got it. Chris!”

“I heard him loud and clear, but I’m begging you! Please go back to shore! Please, Sir Ein!”

Ein didn’t turn back, keeping his back to Chris as he stood resolute on the ship’s bow. He took a deep breath before letting out an air of intensity that the knight had never experienced before.

“Under my name, Ein von Ishtarica, I shall declare a royal edict! Christina Wernstein, Vice Captain of the Knights Guard! Use your warship to prevent House Gracier’s vessel from being swept away!”

“A-A royal edict?! Sir Ein, what are you—” Chris started, but her voice trembled and her composure crumbled under the weight of the prince’s power.

The adventurers and knights were also dumbfounded. Not only did the crown prince appear in a graveyard, but he suddenly gave out a command.

“Dill, I’ll leave the ship to you,” Ein said.

“Yes, Your Highness. Your wish is my command.”

While standing at the bow of the ship, Ein breathed deeply and stretched out his limbs.

“Sir Ein, what are you... Please stop this at once!” Chris pleaded.

“The Vice Captain isn’t allowed to defy the crown prince’s commands. Follow them, Chris. In the meantime, I’ll—”

The Sea Dragon let out a deafening screech as it emerged from the ocean. A short distance away, the beast caught a glimpse of Ein and charged the Gracier’s ship.

“I’ll fight this thing,” Ein said.

Ein didn’t need to look at his status card to know that his power had grown since he absorbed the cursed magic stone. He summoned a sextuplet of

Phantom Hands; the powered-up tendrils were now more muscular and menacing than ever before.

“All right. I can do this!”

Jaws were agape upon witnessing this unforeseen development. With his Phantom Hands pressed firmly against the Dragon’s skull, the prince had suddenly and single-handedly stopped a walking natural disaster in its tracks. *I guess our training with the Red Bison ended up coming in handy, Instructor Kaizer!*

However, the intense impact of the dragon’s charge had forced the Gracier’s ship to retreat. Fortunately, Chris’s warship managed to take the brunt of the blow while supporting the smaller vessel.

“I’ll take victory in the first move, Sea Dragon!” Ein yelled.

Not a single soul had expected to see a human stop such a colossal charge. While Chris understood Ein’s orders, she couldn’t process what had just played out in front of her.

“S-Sir Ein! You never said that you’d take it head-on!” Dill yelled.



“That’s because I didn’t! Sorry Dill, but I have to take a quick dip! So please sit back and wait for me!” Ein shouted back.

“A quick dip?! Wh-What are you planning?!”

“I’d love if it kept attacking us, but I doubt things would go that smoothly. That monster’s a living creature after all.”

At the other end of Ein’s tendrils, the Sea Dragon roared as it relentlessly tried to push back. It attempted to create any sort of collateral damage it could in the process, hoping to drag Dill’s and Chris’s ships into its strike zone. A few moments later, the Sea Dragon started to submerge itself into the water—just as Ein had predicted.

“I’m going to face it by myself! Just me and the Sea Dragon going toe-to-toe!” the prince said.

He summoned a seventh appendage that zoomed straight for the Sea Dragon’s forehead. Equipped with a special claw crafted by Katima, this particular tendril was known as the Dark Straw. The dragon screamed in agony as the claw pierced its forehead and reached the magic stone within.

“I might have to rethink the name ‘Dark Straw.’ Sounds kinda lame...” Ein muttered.

The Sea Dragon tried to shake off Ein’s grasp, but the other six tendrils restrained the dragon’s body. The monster dived underwater, dragging the boy down with it. No one was able to keep up with the rapidly changing situation.

“Sir Ein! Sir Ein!” Chris screamed as the boy was dragged into the water.

Ein was pulled deeper and deeper into the sea as the dragon continued to dive. He was worried about the ever-increasing water pressure, but the cursed stone had given the prince a vague idea on how to best protect himself. It was now a battle of stamina, magical energy, and oxygen. *It’s a war of attrition, you snake!*

Ein’s plan was stupidly straightforward and simple. If he absorbed the magic stone, he would be the victor. However, he’d lose if he ran out of stamina before then. If the need for them arose, Ein had the bag of Healbird stones tied

to his waist.

“RAAAAAAH!” the dragon roared out of pain, realizing that its magic stone was being absorbed. It continued to violently shake its head, attempting to wriggle free of Ein’s grasp. *Stop moving around so much! This isn’t a walk in the park for me either, so I’d say we’re on equal footing!* The ocean started to grow dimmer and dimmer. It may have been far too late, but he felt a tinge of fear. Even so, if he wanted to gaze upon the blue skies once more, it was vital that he slew the Sea Dragon. *Damn... I didn’t think I’d need to use this so soon!*

His stamina was decreasing at an alarming rate. He needed to muster all the magical energy and mental fortitude he had to maintain the several Phantom Hands he had restraining the dragon. With his strength sapped, Ein started popping Healbird stones—one after another to keep his energy topped off. *I can hold my breath for only so long. Hurry up and die already!*

Several seconds had passed since the boy was dragged underwater and he’d be needing some air soon; the only thing a Healbird’s stone wouldn’t provide. However, it must’ve been excruciating for the Sea Dragon to have its magic stone consumed while it still breathed. The beast’s roars grew more intense and its movements more desperate. *You’re one in a million, Sea Dragon. I’ve never had something so wonderfully delicious. I wish we met under different circumstances; I would have loved to properly savor your flavors.*

A lovely seafood medley delighted his palate. It was as if the condensed extract of a seafood buffet—a delectable mix of fish, crustacean, and shellfish—danced about in his mouth. The masterful swirl of these individual tangs complemented each other perfectly. Though he wasn’t able to exactly pinpoint what he was tasting, he knew that he’d never had anything this delicious before. *Huh, I guess if I can make such a detailed flavor analysis in a situation like this, I must really be a magic stone gourmet!*

A minute had passed since he’d gone underwater and his body had grown sluggish due to the lack of oxygen. Ein would lose the very moment his Phantom Hands disappeared, allowing the Sea Dragon to do as it pleased.

“RAAAAAAH!”

The Sea Dragon was also fighting for its life, using every last drop of might it

had left while its opponent did the same. However, Ein's grip and limbs were about to reach their limits. *I can still absorb the stone! If I don't have enough power, I just have to force it out! This stone's highly nutritious!*

As Ein continued to absorb the Sea Dragon's power, he threw that power right back at it. Due to the massive amount of energy required to maintain what was now nine Phantom Hands, the boy felt an incredible level of strain crashing down upon his body. Finally, something had to give. *No way... I'm out of Healbird stones?!*

It was now a battle of sheer willpower. However, Ein was out of juice. Both the Sea Dragon and the crown prince were approaching death's door. Tears of blood ran down Ein's cheek as patches of skin on his arms slowly peeled away. With no air left, the boy's vision and consciousness started to fade. *I guess I couldn't win... But you're gonna die too... Right, Sea Dragon? Why don't we call this a draw?*

However, Ein was desperate to grasp victory. He wanted to finish this and return home to keep living alongside his loved ones. At very least, he could make sure that Chris returned alive. Even if the crown prince died, so would the Sea Dragon. *Clad in a suit of black armor... No one could hope to equal his skill with a blade... The Dullahan... I wanted to be strong like the Dullahan—wait, that's it! I'll do just that!*

This plan was his last hope. Irrked that he wasn't able to personally deliver the final blow, Ein removed the jet-black shortsword from the scabbard on his waist. A gift from his grandmother, the blade had become the boy's favorite weapon—like a partner. *This is the end, Sea Dragon! You were tasty, but my loss to you has caused me to hate you.*

With those final thoughts racing through his mind, Ein plunged his dagger into the Sea Dragon's forehead. *I'm sorry mother, Krone, Chris...* With an unsettling squelch, the dragon's flesh was torn through. The Dark Straw slipped out from the dragon's head as Ein's Phantom Hands started to dissipate.

"R-RAAAAAH?!"

Suddenly, something occurred as Ein lost consciousness. At the moment he went limp, the boy's sword expelled dark smoke within the water. The dark mist

and its powerful aura gradually spread, filling the Sea Dragon's magic stone. The beast finally stopped moving after the light left its eyes. An earth shattering thud echoed up from the ocean floor—the Sea Dragon's magic stone cracked following its final breath.

After a much duller thud, the jet-black shortsword and its aura disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Chapter Six: The Crown Prince Returns

With the Sea Dragon's defeat, the fear that permeated the streets of Magna was instantly wiped away in an elated eruption of joy. The unit assembled to slay the beast had sustained massive losses, but a good number of them managed to survive; even those who were thrown overboard returned home in one piece.

The surviving heroes tied up one of the Sea Dragon's corpses and dragged it back to shore. Many of Magna's residents were shocked by the overwhelming sight, but the fact that two of these scourges had been slain was heralded as a monumental victory for all.

Amidst the festivities, a beautiful woman sat on the deck of the Graciers' boat. She was waiting for the boy resting on her lap to wake up. She anxiously looked on, but her worried expression quickly shifted to one of delight when he started to slowly open his eyes.

"Huh? Where am..." the boy managed to mutter.

"Are you awake, you foolish crown prince?"

He turned to the gentle voice that he'd heard quite clearly. "Oh hey Chris. It's been a couple minutes, hasn't it?"

Her eyes were red and puffy; it was clear that she'd been crying. "Don't say that so nonchalantly... Sir Ein."

Her usual dignified appearance was nowhere to be seen; she'd let some of her true feelings slip through.

"Don't call me a fool. I'm the crown prince, you know," Ein said.

"Say what you will! You idiot! You fool!"

In contrast to her breathtaking appearance, she sounded like a young girl—a trait that Ein held dear. At the same time, he finally realized that he was still alive.

“I guess I did return. I thought I was done for,” he said.

“Please have a look at your chest.”

“My chest?”

He looked down to the necklace that Warren had given him a while back. A ruby of the earth was supposed to be hanging from the prince’s neck, but it had shattered without leaving a trace behind.

“Huh? The ruby of the earth is gone.”



“That stone also activates when it senses that its owner’s life is in danger. That’s why you were able to float to the surface instead of drowning.”

Ein knew that the jewel would protect him from danger, but he didn’t know that it could literally save his life.

“I see. So that’s how I survived,” he said.

“Please... Never do something like this again. I’m begging you. Never, ever again!” Chris pleaded.

“I know... I don’t think I’ll be running into situations like this too often anyways.”

Chris was impossibly overjoyed to know that Ein had swooped in to save her. Even though she allowed him to rest on her lap, she couldn’t keep herself from voicing her concerns.

“Dill told me that you fried the royal family’s water train to get here...and you used a royal edict to do it.”

“Seems like I have someone in need of scolding.”

“P-Please don’t! In any case, I believe *you* must be on the receiving end of the scolding to come, Sir Ein.”

The boy was well aware that he’d really pushed his luck this time around, but wasn’t ready for one of the knight’s lectures.

“L-Let’s calm down,” Ein said, swiftly changing subjects. “Hey, it seems like they’ve brought a Sea Dragon corpse to shore. Whoa, it’s huge!”

Even atop Chris’s lap, Ein could tell how massive the monster was. With all those ropes tied around its body, the beast didn’t seem to be very intimidating anymore.

“H-Huh? You fought it head-on and it’s only now that you’re shocked by its size?” Chris asked.

“Well, I was kind of busy at that moment. It was hard to get a real good look at it...”

“Goodness... The Sea Dragon’s entire body can be harvested for its valuable

materials.”

That made sense. Even the bones of this powerful monster would probably be useful.

“Right, I just remembered! Chris, I have something important to tell you!”

“I-Important? Do you perhaps have another injury that I don’t know about?!”

“The Sea Dragon’s magic stone was delicious!”

Chris fell silent.

“H-Huh? Chris? Why are you quiet?”

The beast’s taste had hit him with an incredibly pleasant flavor experience, and he felt it was vital to make this known. A glimmer faded from Chris’s eyes as she looked down at him coldly.

“You’re a foolish crown prince, Sir Ein!” She gently knocked his forehead, causing Ein to look back at her with a frown.

“This was really important to me! Why must you always reprimand me without giving me a chance to explain?!”

“H-Huh? Why am I being treated as the bad guy here?”

Chris sounded a tad glum when she heard her prince’s defiant retorts. After a little while, the two looked at each other and swapped gentle, understanding smiles.

“Let’s go back to the castle. Everyone’s waiting for us,” Ein said.

“All right. I shall protect my foolish crown prince on our way home.”

Shortly after Ein had regained consciousness, White Night’s grand conference room had caught wind of the crown prince’s actions in his battle with the Sea Dragon.

“Was his education the problem? Was it Olivia’s fault? Or was it the environment we raised him in? What say you, Warren?” Silverd asked.

“I’d add his country of birth to that list,” the chancellor replied.

“I see. That’s fair.”

Amid the nervous atmosphere, good news had reached the castle.

“Please excuse me, Your Majesty,” a butler said.

Though Warren and the other ministers were present, the servant headed straight for the king. The butler seemed shocked as he delivered the news into Silverd’s ear.

“I-Is this true?!” Silverd gasped.

“Most certainly. I just received the report from the commander.”

“Your Majesty? Whatever seems to be the matter?” Warren said, confused as he looked on at the king’s astonishment.

The king provided no answers and turned to Lloyd, who sat at the opposite end of the room. “A good deed should never go unrewarded, but an indiscretion should never go unpunished. Consequently, I’m at a loss on how to punish Ein and Dill.”

Lloyd looked back, perplexed by these words. Should Dill return, the marshal knew that the only punishment that awaited his son was execution.

“At a loss? There’s only one punishment that comes—” Lloyd started.

Silverd clapped his hands and interrupted the marshal. Once he had everyone’s attention, he said, “Everyone, we’ll adjourn our meeting on the Sea Dragon for now.”

No one in the room could hide their shock upon hearing the king’s words. It seemed absurd to end a critical meeting while the nation’s security was at stake.

“Settle down, everyone. I’m simply stating that there’s no reason for this meeting to continue. Our unit defeated one Sea Dragon, and Crown Prince Ein almost single-handedly slew the other. While there were many losses, more than half of our heroes have returned. Commander Wernstein is safe as well!”

While no one could believe that Crown Prince Ein bested the Sea Dragon all by himself, the room erupted into a volley of cheering after a brief moment of silence. No one knew how the kid did it, but he’d just saved the country from

annihilation.

“Y-Your Majesty, what did you just...” Warren stammered.

“Impossible! Sir Ein slew the Sea Dragon by himself?!” Lloyd cried, equally stunned.

“I told you, did I not? Hence, I need to balance out their sins alongside their successes in order to provide the proper prize or punishment,” the king replied.

“Y-Your Majesty... I understand your words, but Dill’s actions combined with those of my own in battle with Sir Ei—”

“They’ve brought back excellent results, have they not? Then there’s good reason for me to reconsider a few things. Your son certainly did lead Ein into a dangerous battlefield, but one could say that he was merely expressing his loyalty. However, that loyalty was to Ein and not to the country. It could be easily seen as an act of rebellion.” Lloyd quietly listened along; the king spoke the truth. “But what of those results? Ein slew a Sea Dragon, a feat worthy of heralding him as a hero. Along with saving the lives of many, he prevented us from losing one of our nation’s treasures: Vice Captain Christina Wernstein. At the very least, this wouldn’t have happened without the interference of Ein and Dill. Am I correct, Warren?”

“That’s precisely so, Your Majesty. And what of the Sea Dragon’s remains?” Warren asked.

“Their bodies were dragged to shore.”

“We certainly wouldn’t have been able to harvest materials from two Sea Dragons if the unit was wiped out. It would be an incomparable achievement if they were dragged to shore in their entirety. Those materials are priceless, after all.”

The Sea Dragon’s remains were quite valuable and could be used in a variety of ways—using every part of the monster wouldn’t be a problem. These priceless materials had never been dragged to shore in one piece before, let alone two whole corpses to harvest from.

“But this is still an issue, Your Majesty. They must be punished. Dill had sent the crown prince into dangerous waters. The favorable results were an indirect

benefit,” Warren finished.

“Precisely. I’m torn as to what to do,” Silverd replied.

When Lloyd had heard these words, he had a glimmer of hope sparkle in his eyes. The marshal and his boy had caused a fair bit of trouble, but if there was any chance his son could escape execution, he’d take it.

“Your Majesty! If I may humbly speak, please take my head and raze House Gracier! I’m begging you, please spare the lives of my wife and child!” Lloyd shouted, prostrating.

Though other figures of authority were present, Lloyd paid them no mind.

“Dill has indeed committed a grave offense, but as I said earlier...I can not dismiss his achievements either, Lloyd,” Silverd replied.

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

After several moments, Silverd had finally come to a decision. He gave a faint smile after settling on the proper punishment. “Dill will lose his status as a member of House Gracier. He’ll be stripped of his position as a knight and considered a commoner. Additionally, House Gracier will be fined a decade’s worth of their income.”

“Y-Your Majesty?! Is that the punishment?” Lloyd asked in bewilderment. They’d gotten off far too easily.

“Lastly, Dill will be conscripted into national service for the next eighty years. The details of his service would be left to Ein, I suppose.”

As the king’s words implied, Dill’s punishment would be his service to the nation. Under this humane agreement, Dill would lose a bit of freedom, but could still make a life for himself. Given that Ein would be the one with Dill’s life in his hands, it wasn’t hard to imagine why this was considered to be a gentle punishment.

“Y-You have my utmost gratitude for your generosity!” Lloyd said, tears streaming down his face after hearing Silverd’s final judgment. The marshal was relieved that the lives of his wife and child had been spared.

A troubled Ein sat at the corner of a naval port, trying to have a light meal. He smiled upon realizing he couldn't pour an ounce of strength into his arms.

"Huh, my arms won't move," he said nonchalantly.

Chris conked out for a moment as she sank into her chair. Sitting nearby, Dill let out a heavy sigh.

"How can you be so lighthearted about that?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I'm numb, but I can still feel some sensations. I think my body's just exhausted from using all that strength. Let's sit up, Chris," Ein replied.

He was as easygoing as ever, unfazed by Dill's worries. The prince remained calm as he continued to rouse Chris.

"H-Huh?! Apologies, I had a dream that your arms wouldn't move..." Chris started.

"That wasn't a dream. I don't think this is permanent, though I'll feel better after a bit of shut-eye," Ein replied.

"How can you say that?! You're not a doctor! Let's go!"

"Huh?! G-Go where?!"

"There are many doctors around town! They'll fix you up!"

"Wait! Dill, help me!"

"Dame Chris, I heard earlier that we'd be returning to the royal capital on the *Princess Olivia*," Dill said, ignoring his master's words.

"Correct. We'll take the *Princess Olivia* to the royal capital's port," Chris replied.

"Then why don't we head to the ship now? We'll tie Sir Ein to the bed so he actually rests."

"What?! H-Hey, Dill?!" Ein yelped as he'd been betrayed. Dill gave a faint smile, knowing he'd tricked the prince.

"That's a very good idea. Sir Ein, let's go!" Chris said.

"Wait! Don't carry me! This is embarrassing! Let me walk at least!"

Dill claimed that Ein would have food brought to him once they got on board. After a bit of begging, Ein was allowed to walk over to the ship. Chris held on to his hand so he wouldn't run, but it only made the prince blush.

"I wish you a good rest, Sir Ein," Dill said.

"Y-You traitor!" Ein yelled.

"I'm only sending along my best wishes." He stared at the prince's back and waited until his master was out of sight before sadly smiling. "Today is my last day as your guard, Sir Ein. I'm sure I'll be able to send you off with a smile in my final moments."

Dill knew that the punishment of execution awaited him upon his return home. From deep in his heart, he apologized to his parents for being a horrible son.

"But I have no regrets," he murmured. "I suppose my loyalty pointed me in the right direction."

Thanks to his unwavering loyalty, Dill was able to support his prince in a dire situation. Though he was sure he'd be executed, that didn't put a damper on his mood.

"Being alone is a little isolating, but I suppose it's not bad to enjoy this lingering sense of victory. I even can enjoy a meal while reveling in Sir Ein's triumph. Not a bad day at all," Dill said. His heart was filled with pride.

He was absolutely thrilled that the kid he'd been watching from the sidelines had become the nation's savior. The knight couldn't be happier.

Several minutes later, Ein was surrounded by a variety of medicinal magical tools while a crack team of doctors were working their healing magic.

"If you're too careless next time, you may not be able to move your arms again...or they just might be shredded into pieces," a doctor said.

"Understood, thank you for the warning," Ein replied.

"Good to hear, but how did you get so beat up? These wounds are way more than the average human should be able to take..."

The doctor mumbled to themselves and left the room. Chris approached Ein's bedside.

"The doctor isn't far off; it very much was a battle beyond the capabilities of most humans," she said.

Ein laughed. "I guess so." The prince was bracing himself for the scolding of a lifetime.

"Now then, I'm sure you're hungry. Shall we eat something?"

"H-Huh?"

"Pardon? Is something the matter?"

Ein was befuddled by her words and tone of voice—sweet and gentle tones that had the boy inclined to start acting like a spoiled child.

"Were you expecting me to lecture or scold you?" Chris asked.

"U-Uh, n-no..."

"Good grief... I'm only going to let this slide for today, all right?"

The kind and lenient Chris was always a gentle soul, but seemed to be emanating a particularly sweet aura that day. The devoted knight appeared to be more dedicated to her position than ever before.

"Please allow me to sit next to you. I shall give you a hand," she said.

She nabbed the boy's spoon, scooped up a bit of food, and started blowing on it to cool it off.

"Ch-Chris?! This is a bit embarrassing!" Ein protested.

"How else are you going to eat?"

Steam was rising from the spoonful as Chris brought it to his mouth, but Ein was too shy to open wide.

"Don't be stubborn. You must eat to regain your strength," she said.

Given that there was no other way for him to eat, Ein finally cracked under her serious gaze.

"Right. I'm just eating," he said.

Ein was so nervous that couldn't remember a thing about the food's taste, but the boy's body was quite happy to get a good helping of vitamins and nutrients tossed into his gullet.

"Is it good?" Chris asked.

He didn't want to worry Chris by admitting he'd lost his sense of taste, but he knew that he had to say something.

"It's delicious. Thank you, Chris," he replied.

He was partaking in a variety of dishes made with Magna's delicious seafood. The boy discreetly smiled to let himself know that he wasn't lying about that.

"Heh heh. Then that makes me happy," Chris smiled. After taking note of her flushed porcelain skin, Ein was drawn into the knight's clear eyes of sapphire.

I'm so glad I was able to save her... He was smiling, but something inside him had finally given out as tears started to well up from his emerald eyes.

"S-Sir Ein?! Was the food too hot?! I'm so sorry!" Chris said.

Ein laughed. "You're a hoot! That's the Chris I know. I'm fine by the way; the food's temperature is just perfect...and I'm hungry! I want another bite!"

Ein had never felt such a large sense of accomplishment before. He'd made a grand speech at that castle party, but he also defeated the Sea Dragon entirely of his own volition. He felt as if he was a few steps closer to his goal of becoming someone like the first king.

The Royal Capital's port was abuzz with the good news as the *Princess Olivia* docked. Silverd, Lloyd, Warren, and other Ishtarican authority figures were awaiting the crown prince's return.

"It's wonderful that Sir Ein managed to defeat that monster," Warren said as he stared at the pair of ships that accompanied the *Princess Olivia*—they were loaded with the dragons' corpses.

"I agree. The beasts are certainly large, magnificent, and terrifying," Silverd said.

“I-Indeed. How did Sir Ein manage to take one down?”

While they were talking, Ein, Chris, and Dill had disembarked before making their way to the king. The citizens cheered and heralded Ein as a hero.

“I’ve returned, Your Majesty,” the prince said.

Ein didn’t sport his usual innocent demeanor, looking a tad sheepish as he faced his grandfather. However, he also expressed a feeling of pride.

“I have a lot on my mind, but first thing’s first. As your king, I must offer these words to you: well done, Ein!” Silverd said.

“Welcome back, Sir Ein. I’m shocked that you have slain the Sea Dragon,” Warren said.

“I’m glad that you’re back safe, Sir Ein,” Lloyd said before turning to his son. “Dill, you understand what is about to happen, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know what I’ve done Marshal Lloyd—no, father. I’ve made my bed and I’m prepared to sleep in it,” Dill replied.

Lloyd focused on his son with a stern gaze. With his faculties in control, a determined Ein looked into the marshal’s eyes.

“Lloyd,” Ein said. The boy was putting out airs not dissimilar from the time he revealed himself as the crown prince.

“Yes, Your Highness?” Lloyd replied. The boy had never called his name so forcefully before. The marshal seemed to be restless while everyone else was looking at the pair in shock.

“Dill was under my orders, the crown prince’s orders. I won’t hear a single grievance.”

Warren was the most surprised by this sight. Ein’s display of royal assertion was even greater than that of Silverd in his early days. The chancellor felt the aura of a powerful monarch in his presence.

“Sir Ein, I mean, Your Highness! Even if you say so…”

“I won’t repeat myself again, Lloyd. I won’t allow you to make any further complaints in regards to *my* orders.”

Ein had made it so that no one could dissent; however, the boy's words carried more weight than he'd expected. Taking the marshal's silence as a sign of acceptance, the crown prince continued to shield Dill.

"I understand that you must decide whether the *few* royal edicts I issued were appropriate or not, but now is not the time for that."

Dill, Silverd, and Warren quickly grasped the intentions behind the prince's phrasing.

The group boarded a carriage and sped past merchants selling their wares on the capital's bustling main street.

"Sir Ein, may I ask one thing?"

"What is it, Warren?"

"Regarding those handful of royal edicts... What were the explicit details of your commands?"

The chancellor's question gave the Graciers a jolt while Ein furrowed his brows. After several moments of careful consideration, the prince wisely chose his words.

"First, I forcefully commandeered and blew out the royal family's water train. Second, I had Dill prepare a horse and serve as my bodyguard."

He'd also issued another edict to Chris, but he chose to skim over that detail for the moment—Dill was the prince's primary concern.

"Wh-What are you saying, Sir Ein?!" Dill shouted.

While it was rude to interrupt the crown prince, no one made an effort to reprimand Dill. Ein simply raised his hand to silence his guard. The prince proceeded to stare right into the chancellor's eyes.

"Did you think of the consequences if your actions were considered to be inappropriate? There's a chance you could be expelled from the royal family," Warren said.

"I did, but I couldn't stay silent with Chris's life in danger," Ein replied.

“You did save her, but if you failed... Ishtarica would have lost its crown prince. Both your mother and Lady Krone would’ve been devastated.”

Ein was fully aware of that. However, he wasn’t aware of how a sobbing Krone would appear. He’d never seen it, but the boy could easily imagine it.

“The first king slew the Demon Lord. If he failed, Ishtarica would have been a pipe dream. I know that mistakes may have been made and I’m sure there are many who fear failure, but do you think the first king made a mistake, Warren?”

“That’s an extreme argument, one that’s far too juvenile and leaves too much room for debate... However,” Warren said, his voice trembling as his tone started to sound oddly nostalgic, “when *you* say it, it’s quite convincing.”

His words were vague yet meaningful, leading Ein to tilt his head to the side in confusion. Before the prince could ask any questions, Chris energetically stepped forward.

“Sir Warren, this was my blunder. The strength of my command and my own might weren’t up to the task. That’s why Sir Ein arrived to my aid. He is an incredibly kind and splendid individual...and I do believe it’s high time that I was punished,” Chris said, imploring her present company to spare Ein.

The entire carriage was stunned by the knight’s appeal, for no one had ever seen her act that way before.

“Chris, could you stay silent for now?” Ein asked.

“B-But...”

Silverd let out a hearty laugh. “Ha ha ha! It seems like we’re the bad guys here, Warren.”

The chancellor chuckled as well. “Indeed. I do feel a tad guilty for staying silent. Why don’t you fill them in, Your Majesty?”

With his chancellor’s encouragement, the king had decided to pass his judgment. “I’m not a fan of the saying ‘all’s well that ends well.’ Every action must be judged accordingly, be it good or bad. I cannot deny that these thoughts have crossed my mind.” He looked at Ein before he spoke. “Warren, lay out the rewards and the punishment.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Now, one Sea Dragon is equal to about twenty years of our national budget,” Warren started. Since two dragons could be harvested this time around, the national treasury had experienced a sudden windfall. As such, no punishment would be needed to address the issued edicts. “However, with the royal water train battered and the Graciers’ ship to consider, we’ll have no rewards to provide.”

All of Ein’s actions had apparently canceled each other out, providing an outcome that the prince was more than pleased with.

“And that’s that. For everything else, you’re to stay within the castle’s walls for the next two months. Is that clear?” Silverd said.

“Yes, Your Majesty. I graciously thank you for your generosity,” Ein replied.

“Now, Lloyd. Here’s your punishment,” the king said, looking at the marshal.

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“As I’ve stated earlier, you’ll be fined for allowing Ein to escape. In addition, you’ll be stripped of your knightly status and position as Ishtarica’s marshal.”

“Your wish is my command.”

“On the topic of rewards, Chris will be appointed as my new marshal in your place. I won’t hear a single grievance about it.”

Chris almost let out a gasp of surprise, but managed to remain silent as she bowed her head in front of the king.

“Lloyd, you will continue being my personal knight. Serve me well with your life,” Silverd said.

Lloyd hastily raised his head; he was expecting to be forcibly retired. “Y-Your Majesty?” His voice trembled, and one could see the tiredness in the marshal’s eyes. He thought that he’d misheard his king at first.

“Sir Lloyd, it’s tough to be in a position such as His Majesty’s,” Warren said.

“Indeed. Good grief, what am I to do with you fools? They saved Magna, slew a pair of Sea Dragons, and saved our Chris along with the rest of her men. With marvelous results such as these, I have no severe punishments to dole out,” Silverd said.

Ein had saved tens of thousands of lives, brought decades of wealth to the country, and rescued a legion of brave men. A harsh punishment was out of the question.

“Th-Then Your Majesty, what about Dill’s punishment? He followed *my* orders,” Ein gingerly asked.

Silverd gave a nonchalant wave of his hand. “None. How could I punish him? I’m already tired and stop calling me ‘Your Majesty.’ I’m your grandfather.”

“Yes, grandfather. So Dill’s not going to be punished, right?!”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.”

“Sir Ein, His Majesty cannot do a thing. This has been the case from the moment you mentioned issuing an edict. He can punish you, but Dill will be absolved of any responsibility. Ha ha ha!” Warren explained.

And since Ein had returned with the goods, he couldn’t be punished either. Perhaps Silverd would be called a doting grandparent and maybe he didn’t make the right choice as a king, but he didn’t regret his decision one bit.

“Ah, but there is one last detail, Sir Ein. We take no responsibility for the punishments Princess Olivia and Lady Krone have in store for you,” Warren added.

Ein was especially afraid of his mother. He’d worried her to an inconceivable degree and the boy was now expecting a good scolding. Krone must’ve been infuriated with him as well, guaranteeing that a series of unavoidable lectures were in the prince’s future.

“Sir Ein, I’ll go with you, okay?” Chris said, trying to calm him.

Feeling slightly reassured by his knight, Ein was relieved to know that his wild day was finally over.

“Ein!”

From the moment he entered the castle, Ein found himself within his mother’s firm embrace before he could even respond.

"I'm sorry. I've returned," he managed to say.

His heart ached upon seeing his mother's face wet with tears. He wrapped his arms around her as she started to sob. Krone soon appeared from behind her.

"Welcome back, my Crown Prince. You sure know how to make women cry," she said.

Krone had tried her best to mask her puffy eyes with makeup, but it was still noticeable from the edges of her eyes. It was quite obvious that she'd spent the entire day crying following Ein's departure.

"Sorry," Ein replied with a smile.

"You nitwit," she said. Krone's words were unusually impolite, but her demeanor was cheery.

"I'm sorry for worrying you."

"You say it so easily. In any case, you've changed a bit since becoming a hero."

"I've changed?"

"You're much cooler now. Did you break out of a shell after defeating the Sea Dragon? Or is it because you made a handful of women cry? You're a lot calmer than I thought you'd be, so I'm surprised."

"I'm sorry and I've been reflecting on what I did."

Ein was happy to be praised by Krone, but as always, her compliments came with a bit of a biting edge to them. "I'm happy though. And since you've returned home safely, I forgive you just for today."

"*I'm* happy that I can speak with you again too, Krone."

"Heh, thank you. However, you have to clean your mother's room, all right?"

"Clean?"

"Please do give Matha a hand tomorrow."

Once those words left Krone's mouth, Olivia had torn herself away from Ein before sheepishly covering her face with her hands. Despite his bewilderment, Ein forced out a smile in response, mostly because he couldn't move his arms.

The next morning, Ein made his way to the infirmary for his arms to be looked at. Though the boy was a bit nervous to discover that Katima was tending to him, he noticed that his aunt's paws were quite deft at changing his bandages.

A short while later, Chris arrived to give him a hand with eating.

"You're a klutz, but mew like to take care of people... I see," Katima said. The boy's aunt seemed to be enjoying herself as she sat in a nearby chair.

Chris was brisk and efficient in her care of Ein. Katima, on the other hand, couldn't help but tease the pair when she saw the knight spoon-feeding the prince. Now accustomed to her new duties, the knight warmly smiled while going about her work. However, Ein was less than thrilled with the situation.

"I didn't want to make a show of it, so I'm eating breakfast in the infirmary," he said.

"I see. I noticed that mew didn't eat anything while everyone else was dining yesterday. Did mew have Chris help you eat in your room?"

"That's right! You don't have to say it out loud!"

"Ack! Sir Ein, please refrain from jerking around. You'll spill your food," Chris said.

"Right. Sorry."

Ein's grand accomplishment was a historic one, but the newly christened hero appeared to be nothing more than an embarrassed boy while in front of the elven knight. The previous evening, Olivia had insisted on taking care of her son, but Chris vocally disagreed with this idea. To the princess's surprise, the blushing knight firmly stated that she would be the prince's caretaker and was ultimately given the role.

I hope that my arms heal up soon...

"Sir Ein, is the food good?" Chris asked.

"Yeah, it's really delicious...I think... No, I'm sure it is."

His sense of taste had been absent since yesterday. The prince knew he'd

either have to get used to it or bear with it for the next couple of days. As the Cait-Sith was taking in this unusual sight, she decided to change the subject.

“Speaking of, Ein. Mew said you absorbed the Sea Dragon’s magic stone, didn’t mew?”

“I did. Why do you ask?” he weakly replied. He was no longer resistant to being cared for.

“Show me-ow your stats. I’m curious to see how much you’ve impurroved.”

“Sure, go ahead. I’m sorry Chris, but could you take out my card?”

The three were stupefied by what they read on his status card.

Ein von Ishtarica

[Job] Named

[Stamina] 4055

[Magical Power] 7367

[Attack] 473

[Defense] 952

[Agility] 395

[Skills] Dark Knight, Grand Sorcery, Ocean Current, Thick Fog, Toxin Decomposition EX, Absorb, Gift of Training

The high stats caused Chris’s eyes to widen in shock while Katima tried to lighten the mood by making a funny face. “Did mew know that ‘Named’ is a monster job type? When did mew quit being a human?”

“That’s weird; why did that happen?” Ein asked.

He’d recently absorbed the cursed stone and a good bit of the Sea Dragon’s stone. Even though Ein didn’t fully consume the latter, he’d experienced an abnormal growth spurt.

“I absorbed three national-treasure-class monsters. Shouldn’t I be a bit

stronger?” Ein asked.

“Paw-lease. Don’t be daft. Would mew gain a kilogram if you ate a kilogram?”

Ein nodded, understanding her straightforward analogy.

“I must have picked up this ‘Ocean Current’ skill from the Sea Dragon. Pretty self-explanatory,” Ein said.

“Mhm...and your other new skill is ‘Grand Sorcery...’ Wait... GRAND SORCERY?!”

Katima stared at the card in disbelief before leaving the infirmary.

While the prince was trying to comprehend his aunt’s actions, she had already returned and was clearly out of breath.

“I’ve brought it with me-ow!”

The princess splayed out a book on a table in front of Ein. She’d actually brought two along with her. One book was a reference guide to manuals while the other was the ancient elven tome she had dumped her savings into. Katima’s manic enthusiasm had Chris reeling back a touch.

“Is your pricey book related?” Ein asked.

“Oh, I just swiped at that by accident, so I brought along with me-ow!” the princess replied as she rapidly flipped through the pages. “Meow! Right here, the Witch. Like the Dullahan, she doesn’t exist anymore, but she was the strongest monster who used meowgic.”

Katima gestured to a page displaying the image of a robed skeleton monster holding a large staff.

“The magic stone mew absorbed belonged to the Witch, Ein! I haven’t thought of why the stone was cursed, but it makes purrfect sense if it came from that monster!”

“Hm, that does check out...”

“Huh? Pardon me, Princess Katima,” Chris suddenly said.

“Mrow? What is it?”

“Sir Ein has received the skill Grand Sorcery. I don’t think it belongs to the

Witch.”

“Mroooow?! What are mew saying?”

“Um, it’s not written in that book. However, it is in this ancient elven tome.”

Katima tilted her head from side to side as nabbed the luxurious book with her paw. “What? Are mew saying that mew can read this book?”

“I can. My tribe is filled with traditional people. The title of the book is *Study on the Truth About the Demon Lord and His Close Aides*—L-Lady Katima?!”

The Cait-Sìth froze before she fell to the ground with a dull thud, her limbs fully stretched out.

“M-M-Meoooow... I didn’t think a purrson who could read this was right under my nose. I should’ve just asked mew to begin with.”

“Wait, but what’s with that title? The truth about the Demon Lord?” Ein asked.

“Yeah it’s been bugging me-ow too. However, the fact that Chris can even read this has captured my curiosity. I’ll have to ask her to translate the rest of the book at a later time.”

At the princess’s request, Chris flipped to the designated page and started reading.

“Right here. The Witch’s skill is Sorcery, but that’s not exactly what Sir Ein has,” the knight explained.

“I don’t get it at all. I’ll need mew to explain it to me-ow.”

I didn’t know Chris had such extensive knowledge, Ein thought. In stark contrast to her usual klutzy self, the knight had access to information that Katima wasn’t aware of. While a handful of rude remarks filled his mind, Ein patiently waited for Chris to work her way through the book.

“The monster on this page is the Elder Lich. Her full name is Elder Lich Silvia. The monster uses her core power to create a shortsword which she tends to give to her mate. Together with her husband, the Dullahan, she supported the Demon Lord in the expansion of his domain,” Chris read. However, one detail had her reeling. “The Dullahan was her husband?!”

That wasn't all. The shortsword illustrated was the exact copy of the jet-black blade that Ein had lost.

"Husband... W-Wait, so the Dullahan's magic stone I absorbed and the cursed stone were— And th-that's not all! The weapon I received from grandmother must be..." Ein was wildly rambling.

The pair of stones Ein had absorbed came from a married couple and he was drawn to their blade in the treasury. The couple's powers and blade had allowed the prince to emerge victorious in his struggle with Sea Dragon. *I see! That's why my Phantom Hands automatically activated when I got close to the cursed stone!* His hypothesis was unrealistic, but it would also give an answer as to why he felt an odd presence when he absorbed it. *The Dullahan's power was alive inside me and he noticed his wife nearby, so the Phantom Hands tried to draw me closer to her!*

However, the words of gratitude followed up by a 'welcome back' still puzzled him.

Olivia's room was messier than he'd expected. It wasn't because she'd gone on a rampage, but rather that her dryad traits had apparently activated.

"I'm sorry... I was just so, so worried about you. I couldn't hold back," Olivia replied.

As Krone had mentioned the night before, Ein was now tasked with helping his mother clean her room. In a nutshell, it was as if it was reclaimed by nature.

"There's a lot of tree roots and ivy," Ein noted as he flashed a forced smile. He saw roots and greenery spilling out from the door.

Martha did say that my mother is a powerful dryad. Since the prince couldn't use his hands, he used his Phantom Hands to open the door. He was greeted by the sight of a massive, entangled web of foliage and roots that emerged from where Olivia was sitting on the sofa.

"Being a dryad is my nature. So if I'm unable to remain calm, I'll always create a mess," the princess murmured.

“I-I see, but you don’t have to be so embarrassed about it.”

Her fidgeting mannerisms coupled with her beautiful face made her look quite charming.

“B-But I can’t help feeling a bit self-conscious when I think this is all a part of my body!” she said.

This was understandable. As a dryad, she was a bit embarrassed by the mess.

“Will I be able to summon roots too?” Ein asked.

“That’s right. You’re more humanlike, but we can practice together when you get a bit older,” his mother replied.

He was curious about the training, but he decided to leave his curiosity for another day. Eager to get the job done, he approached the sofa.

“I’ll be cleaning this up, so you can stay outside mother—”

As Ein offered his services, she suddenly sat on the sofa and said, “Now then, Ein. Will you come here?”

With her famous saintly smile, she patted her lap and invited her son on over. She’d apparently wanted to talk with her son for a little bit. *We didn’t have much time together yesterday, so that’s fair.* Feeling guilty for worrying his mother, Ein sat down next to her on the sofa.

“No no, I want you to sit here,” she said.

She scooped up her son with the slightest bit of force and upon realizing he was just a bit too heavy for her, he raised his body. Without offering a hint of resistance, he allowed himself to be embraced by her arms.

“You’re fine now. You’ve worked so hard and you’re such a good boy,” she cooed.

Ein found himself surrounded by a sweet aroma as he was brought closer to his mother. Upon feeling her warmth, he felt tears suddenly starting to sting his eyes.

“H-Huh?” he mumbled.

“You’re fine. You’re a good boy. You worked really hard, didn’t you? You’re all

right now, there's nothing to worry about," she said in soothing tones.

He couldn't stop himself from crying and tears continued to run down his face. His tensions had melted away when he had awoken on Chris's lap. However, his mother's loving embrace caused Ein to realize that his heart was still heavy and his mind was burnt out.

"Why? Why am I..." he choked.

In his desperation to save Chris, the adrenaline that ran through Ein's body had wiped away the fear most people would experience in the face of the Sea Dragon. When he returned to the castle last night, Krone's surprise remained fresh in his memory. When she noted how oddly calm he was, he was still on edge. The trauma of the battle was hitting him at a delayed pace and his mind needed time to process just what had happened.

"You worked very hard, didn't you?" Olivia continued to lull. "You don't have to worry anymore; there's no need for you to be scared. You're safe at my side once again."

Ein could've died. He might not have been able to save anyone. Chris might've died in front of his eyes. There were plenty of reasons for him to be afraid. He'd forcibly repressed his emotions, but they were finally surfacing in front of his mother.

"We can clean whenever, so why don't we take it easy for a little while" she said.

"P-Please don't tell anyone about this side of me," he managed to say. Though he was overwhelmed, he tried to display at least a shred of his strong will.

Olivia only hugged her son tighter. "Don't you worry. This side of you is something that only I'm allowed to see. I won't tell anyone else about this privilege."

As always, she was soft on her son and quite good at bringing out how he really felt. Ein was calmed by her rhythmic heartbeats.



Epilogue

“So you came here?” a young lady said.

“Yeah, I was chased out,” a boy replied.

“Of course you were. It’s only been two days since the Sea Dragon incident and you’re already trying to move around, Ein. It’s only natural that you’ve been chased off the training grounds.”

“Well, yeah, but I just couldn’t sit still.”

Thinking he could at least run some laps around the castle, he’d put in a request. However, Silverd had his own thoughts about that, “You *do* know that you should repent for your actions, don’t you?” The king proceeded to scold him for leaving the castle without permission. Since he had some freedom within the castle’s walls, Ein decided to visit Krone’s room.

She sighed. “Perhaps my education is lacking, because I haven’t the faintest clue as to what you’re saying.”

“I-I think I’m at fault here,” Ein replied.

“No matter. I understand, so could you please come here?”

Ein was seated on the sofa across from Krone, but he played along like a good boy and moved to sit next to her. He never said it out loud, but Ein had decided to go with the flow after realizing that he’d caused so much trouble for everyone.

“Hm, you’re rather obedient,” Krone said.

“I always am.”

“Were you, now? If so, I don’t think you would’ve rejected my offer the other day.”

“I didn’t reject you.”

She giggled. “Right. It seems that you’ve decided to atone for your deeds, and

all by yourself at that. I think that's quite admirable."

Ein grew tense; he realized that Krone had seen right through him. He definitely furrowed his brow, knowing that he couldn't do anything else.

"You're very admirable, Your Highness. You can come a bit closer, can't you?"

"H-Huh?"

She wrapped her arms around him and leaned him back. Now resting on her lap, Ein was surrounded by a sweet bouquet of floral scents.

"K-Krone? Um, can I ask why you're doing this?" he asked.

"Oh. Are you unaware of what a lap pillow is, Your Highness?"

"I am, but this is just a shocking and sudden turn of events."

"I just feel like doing this. Could you please go along with my wishes?"

Ein chose to stay quiet, over the moon to know that she was doing this for him. He focused on the smoothness of her fingertips as they ran through his hair. He was so close that could hear her breathing calmly while he was enveloped in her warmth. For a moment, it felt as though the two were in a world that was all their own.

"You mustn't push yourself, all right?" Krone said.

"I know. I'm sorry for what I've done."

The sun's rays brightly peeked through from the window, causing Krone to cast a shadow over the prince's face. A pleasant breeze blew through the room, reminding Ein of his reunion with Krone in Magna. The chirping of the birds floated into the room as if they were singing a soothing tune that blended into the background.

"How does your pillow feel?" she asked "I hope you aren't displeased with it."

"If I could buy this pillow, I would in an instant."

"I'll provide it for you whenever you wish. No purchase required. It's a special service I offer, just for you," she said. Her sweet words melted away in his mind. "How did you feel when you fought the Sea Dragon?"

"Are you curious?" Ein teasingly asked. This caused her to gently tap his

cheeks. “Sorry. I was just trying to give it my all. I didn’t have time to think about anything else.”

“Weren’t you scared?”

“Hm...” He thought hard, but he didn’t think he was riddled with fear. “It was only when I returned home that the fear started to sink in. Even when I was dragged into the ocean, I was preoccupied by how delicious the dragon’s stone was. When I was reaching my limit and couldn’t hold my breath any longer, I oddly didn’t feel like I was suffering.”

“You were thinking about food in the middle of the battle? It seems we’ve got quite the gluttonous hero.”

“S-So what? It was just that delicious...”

“I see. So while I was worried to death, you were helping yourself to a five-star Sea Dragon buffet.”

“You make me feel guilty when you say it like that.”

Ein had a rigid expression on his face as Krone started to giggle. After she stroked his hair, her hands slid over to his cheeks—cupping his face with lots of love. “It’s a fact that you’ve saved many lives, and I’m proud of you for doing that. However, I just want you to know that I was worried, okay?”

She slightly tilted her head, causing the bright sunlight to shine in Ein’s face—her way of getting back at him. The curtains fluttered in the breeze before a gust of wind reached the pair. Krone’s hair blew about in the wind and gave off another aroma that had Ein blushing once again. The faint sounds of training knights could be heard coming from outside.

Hearing the knight’s shuffling and grunting, Krone said, “You have to sit still until you’re fully healed, okay?”

“I’m stuck in this castle for two months, so that works out perfectly for me.”

“That’s right. His Majesty is rather kind, isn’t he?”

“I may not look it, but I’m always grateful for him.”

Ein gazed at her face from below. Her shiny and smooth lips allured him as he moved his own face, enticed.

“Now, now. You need to keep being a good boy, all right?” Krone said.

“Right.”

Once Krone allowed him to sit up, Ein took hold of a small cup of tea. His arms were far from full strength, but at least could hold small objects in his hands.

“This tea is delicious. The people of our castle always do amazing work,” Ein said.

As usual, the tea was delectable, but Krone replied to his honest words of praise.

“Heh. I poured that tea, you know,” she teased.

She’d poured her fair share of tea before, but it was plain to see that she had become much more skilled at it. Actually, it wasn’t far off from the tea that Martha poured.

Krone stood up gracefully. “Today’s such a lovely day. I do feel sorry for His Majesty and the others. You always keep them on their toes.”

“H-Hey, give me a break...”

“Oh dear, you seem rather frantic. Then I suppose I’ll let you off.”

Ein was tempted to retaliate and decided to ask Krone about what she said before he left to save Chris. “Hey, were you serious when we last spoke?”

“Whatever are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m referring to, don’t you?”

He was inquiring about the statement that she made—that Ein could do whatever he wished to her. She’d said that to stop him from leaving, but the prince was curious as to how sincere she was.

However, she giggled with pride. “Why don’t I let you in on a little secret?”

“And what would that be?”

Krone continued to look out the window without turning around. Ein gazed at her back for a few seconds before she finally spoke.

“I like you, Ein.”

“Wh-Why would you say something so important so suddenly?!” the flustered prince eked out.

“It didn’t change even after my arrival in Ishtarica. In fact, I think my feelings for you have grown even more.”

She continued to talk with her back turned. Unable to see the expression on her face, Ein wasn’t able to tell how serious she was being.

“Why won’t you turn around?” he asked. “You talk like you’re joking, so just how sincere are you?”

“I wonder? You’re free to interpret my words as you like.”

This made the prince think deeply. He knew that Krone had warm feelings for him, but the boy was a bit nervous as he wasn’t completely sure that was the case. *Red...?* Krone looked to the side ever so slightly, revealing that she was blushing.

“When I always see you pushing yourself like that, I can’t help but worry all the time,” she said. Were her cheeks red from the heat of the sunlight? Or was she shy about confessing her love for Ein? The prince stared back intently, searching for an answer.

“So even if you happen to really, really, *really* worry me again or if I attempt to trap you in my room...” Krone said. She tried to be cute in her display of defiance, but her true feelings were apparent. After a short pause, she turned around to face Ein as her skirt fluttered in the wind. “I won’t know what I’ll do.”

She bent her hips with a low posture as she put her index finger to her lips. Behind her enchanting and sweet appearance was a charm that was far too mature for a girl of her age. A sliver of sunlight illuminated her back—her silvery-blue hair giving off a glossy, divine glow.

She’s beautiful. Ein approached her. The two locked eyes as the sounds of the world around them gradually disappeared off into the distance. Krone simply stood there silently; her usual casual demeanor was replaced with a rather nervous one.

At first they were three steps away, then two steps, and just when they were really close...

“Pardon me, this is Martha. Sir Ein, I’ve received a summons from His Majesty.”

As though she were waiting for the perfect moment, Martha’s knock could be heard bouncing off the door. With the king’s meeting seemingly over, the pair were snapped back into reality as their daily lives came crashing down upon them.

“What a pity. It seems we’re out of time,” Krone said before sticking out her tongue. However, she was far from composed.

“Krone... I know you’re putting up a tough front, but your face is really red,” Ein said.

“U-Ugh! That goes both ways, no? You’re blushing really hard too!”

Realizing that their faces were of the same color, the prince smiled.

“I’ll see you later. If you don’t push too hard, I’ll have a lap pillow for you next time,” Krone replied.

“Thank you, I’ll be looking forward to it.”

He was reluctant to leave, but knew that his time was up. It was blatantly obvious that the pair were enjoying their little exchange. As Krone’s smile was glimmering more brilliantly than the star crystal that adorned her hand, Ein made the audacious request to borrow her lap once more before he left.

“Hey, Ein,” she said.

“Hm? What is it?”

“I’m really glad that I came to this country.”

“Me too... And since you’ve arrived, my feelings have only grown.”

“My goodness! Go on, you mustn’t keep His Majesty waiting!”

“Ha ha, all right. I’ll be back.”

Though they spoke a little too awkwardly and got a little too close, it was fitting for a pair such as Ein and Krone. Once made his leave, Krone sank into the sofa as she put her hand over her heart.

“Good grief... My heart’s still thumping,” she murmured to herself.

Having been so uncharacteristically flustered, it took a good while for the fast beating of Krone's heart to finally settle down.

"I apologize for the wait, grandfather," Ein said.

"Very good. Unlike your aunt, you're a rather punctual child."

Ein stayed silent, opting not to respond to the grievances levied at his feline family member. Silverd sat down across from him while the boy glanced at the trio that accompanied his grandfather.

"Why is everyone gathered?" Ein asked.

Chris sat at Ein's side while the duo of Lloyd and Warren were posted behind the king. The prince was puzzled as none of them seemed to be nervous or scared. In fact, they were all composed as always.

"Warren, if you would," Silverd said.

"Certainly, Your Majesty. As already you know, Sir Ein, you are the crown prince," Warren started.

"That's right," the boy replied.

"I've mentioned this numerous times in the past, but the crown prince will occasionally act as the king's proxy and attend to his public duties."

"I'm aware. Does this mean that there's something I should attend to?"

"Precisely." Warren approached the prince and placed some documents out in front of the boy and his knight.

"Wait, Chris too?" Ein asked.

"Yes, I was actually called over here a few moments ago as well," the knight replied.

Chris and Ein were to carry out their public duties together. However, she wasn't notified of the details either and had arrived alongside her prince for a quick briefing.

"Firstly, please take a look at the first page. It's a summary of the finances shared between Euro and our country in regards to our trade deal," Warren

said.

Euro? Ein thought, but he obediently scanned the documents.

“At a glance, it seems like it’s going well,” the prince observed.

“I agree. It looks like this deal has brought forth excellent results,” Chris added.

“We were able to excavate a vast quantity of sea crystals, which you know are vital in the construction of magical tools. There’s no country more important to us at the moment, other than our own of course,” Warren said.

The two nodded in reply.

“Therefore, we’ve decided to further strengthen our relationship with Euro.”

“Wait, does that mean you’re sending me there?” Ein asked.

Had the destination been Heim, the crown prince would’ve been filled with a tempest of complex emotions. However, he didn’t have a single qualm with Euro. In fact, he was excited to visit.

“Precisely, Ein,” Silverd said. “I’ll take over the meeting from here. I initially felt that this would be a difficult task for you as a first-time proxy, but upon further discussion, we believe that you should be able to handle it. It would cause too big of a stir if I were to go to Euro personally, so we’ve chosen you to go in my stead.”

There was just one problem that popped up in Ein’s mind. “I still have my studies at the academy to attend too...and my exam is coming up soon. How will that be taken care of?”

“You will receive a special exception. As the head of the academy’s board of directors, I’ve made it so you’ll be permitted to take the exam upon your return.” Ein’s test scores would be used to decide which class he’d be placed in for the next school year. He had nothing to worry about.

All right, then I have no problems with leaving. If everything at the academy was handled, Ein was all set to go. He’d always been prepared to serve as the king’s proxy, but the prince never imagined that his first assignment would take him to Euro.

“The matter of ensuring your safety will not present any issues either; Chris and the full might of the Knights Guard will be by your side. Dill and a few of Warren’s apprentices shall join you as well. It’ll be a bit rough for us to lose the protection of the Knights Guard while you’re away, but the castle’s security will be heightened in the meantime. It shouldn’t be much of a problem,” the king said.

“I see. I’m reassured to hear the number of guards coming along,” Ein replied.

The Knights Guard were an elite force of Ishtarica’s most powerful knights—skilled in combat and highly intelligent. Knowing that each of Chris’s knights had the potential to lead the unit in a pinch, Ein felt like he’d be well protected and the safest he ever would be.

“And when will I be headed to Euro?” Ein asked.

“Right after your two months of house arrest is over. Is that clear?”

“That’s quite the short notice.”

Ein was a little weary of his task being decided so suddenly, but he didn’t have room to make any complaints.

“Warren, Chris, I leave Ein in your hands,” the king said.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the two replied.

Ein was gobsmailed. “You’re coming along too, Warren?”

The prince had been provided with another reliable ally, and when it came to matters of business, Warren was second to none.

“Indeed. This will be a very special meeting, after all,” Warren said. “If the king’s proxy and the chancellor were to greet our associates from Euro, they would surely understand our intentions.”

The presence of high-ranking authorities were key in showing Ishtarica’s sincerity. However, many members of high society had their concerns in choosing the right personnel for the job.

“There’s no need for us to go this far for such a rural country.”

“We shouldn’t be bowing our heads to them.”

Others agreed with the decision.

“We’re just making a display of our power.”

“Heim looked down on us in the past. As such, we should apply a degree of intimidation.”

As a result, Ishtarica’s newly christened hero would be standing side by side with Chancellor Warren and the Knights Guard. However, Silverd was saving the biggest surprise for last.

“Since you will be representing me, Ein, I shall permit you to sail upon the *White King*. You must show Euro the pride and strength of Ishtarica!” Silverd declared.

The *White King* was a vessel reserved for the sole use of Ishtarica’s ruler. Regarded as a castle at sea, the colossal warship was equipped with an arsenal of the most powerful weapons available in the nation. Ishtarica’s largest battleship was a polished work of art, crafted with the best technology available.

Ein was sure that his duties in Euro would be more than a little lively.

Afterword

You might have read the first volume or started with this one, but I'd like to thank everyone who's read the second installment of *Magic Stone Gourmet*. I'm the author, Ryou Yuuki.

Thanks to everyone's support, I was able to reprint the first volume as well. Like the first, the second volume has been heavily revised and added to when compared to the web version. The incident that takes place in Ein's first year at academy is completely new, and I received so much help from my pair of editors. I'd be thrilled if readers are able to enjoy it as well.

I'd like to thank Chisato Naruse for the wonderful illustrations in this volume as well. I was able to see slightly older versions of Ein and Krone, new uniforms, the Royal Kingsland Academy, and the intense climax of the battle with the Sea Dragon! Ein was portrayed so bravely that it gave me goose bumps!

The third volume will get to the meat of *Magic Stone Gourmet*. It will start with a trip to Euro before the ancient Elven language will reveal the true history hidden within Katima's book. We'll be entering an arc that involves the entire world!

The spirits dwelling within the magic stones and the truth behind the Demon Lord.

History that was hidden away, and the existence of the true threat that was involved with Ishtarica's creation.

Please look forward to these stories being revealed!

Lastly, I'd like to make an announcement. Shortly after the first volume was released, I received an offer to have the *Magic Stone Gourmet* serialized as a manga! The manga version has been officially announced!

It'll be published on Dra Dra Sharp#—available on ComicWalker and Nico Nico Douga—with Kenji Sugawara in charge of the project. I'm still unable to tell you when it will be released, but I'm guessing that the character designs and teasers

will have been announced on Kadokawa Books and on the official Twitter by the time you read this. Please go check it out.

Thanks to all the readers, I was able to reprint the first volume and have this series turned into a manga. I'd like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone.

Thank you very much for reading this afterword. I'd be grateful if we can meet again in the third volume.

An anime-style illustration of two characters. On the left, a young man with short black hair and green eyes (Ein) is looking towards the right. On the right, a young woman with long blonde hair in a ponytail and blue eyes (Chris) is looking at him. She is holding a piece of light-colored cloth and wrapping it around his neck. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue and white with some light particles.

*Y-You see,
I just happen
to have something
to help with that.
You may have it
if you'd like!*

Chris said as she wrapped
a soft piece of cloth around
Ein's neck.

At the crown prince's birthday party.

Chris

The young elf who serves
as the Vice Captain of
the Knights Guard.

**MAGIC
STONE**
Gourmet

EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE ME THE
STRONGEST!

2



*I'd like
to go to Magna
and fight the
Sea Dragon!*

He questioned himself—holed up
in the castle while his knight was
in imminent danger.

*Even if it's
part of the royal
family's duty to
accept this, I...*

Ein

A reincarnator born with the skill Toxin
Decomposition EX who finds himself
becoming Ishtarica's crown prince.

*Chris
will die...*

*Ein!
For
Ishtarica's
future,
it must be
Chris that
defeats the
monster!*

Olivia

Ein's mother and the
second princess of Ishtarica.

Ein finds out that Chris has been dispatched to deal with a
pair of Sea Dragons that have appeared off the coast of Magna.

At the moment he walked past her, Krone quickly leaned in and pecked the prince on the cheek.

Here's a blessing from a Goddess, for luck.

Goodness, you've always been stubborn, haven't you?

She stepped to the side and allowed him to pass.

Krone

The granddaughter of Heim's former grand duke and Ein's fiancée.

RYOU YUUKI
ART CHISATO NARUSE

2



MAGIC
STONE
Gourmet

EATING
MAGICAL power
MADE me the
STRONGEST!

An anime-style illustration of two characters. On the left, a young man with short black hair and green eyes, wearing a white and purple outfit, looks slightly to the right. On the right, a young woman with long blonde hair in a ponytail and blue eyes, wearing a blue dress, is wrapping a white cloth around the man's neck. The background is a soft, hazy blue with light rays and small white sparkles.

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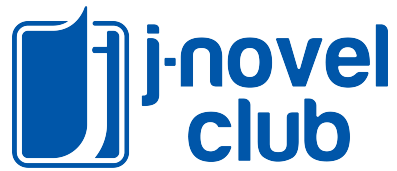
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Magic Stone Gourmet: Eating Magical Power Made Me the Strongest Volume
2

by Ryou Yuuki

Translated by piyo

Edited by Coop Bicknell

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